Lack of Character

Personality and Moral Behavior

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Joining the Hunt

In all that hardness and cruelty there is a knowledge to be gained, a necessary knowledge, acquired in the only way it can be, from close familiarity with the creatures hunted.

John Haines

Précis

I'm possessed of the conviction that thinking productively about ethics requires thinking realistically about humanity. Not everyone finds this so obvious as I do; philosophers have often insisted that the facts about human psychology should not constrain ethical reflection.[1] Then my conviction requires an argument, and that is why I've written this book. The argument addresses a conception of ethical character long prominent in the Western ethical tradition, a conception I believe modern experimental psychology shows to be mistaken. If I'm right, coming to terms with this mistake requires revisions in thinking about character, and also in thinking about ethics.

It's commonly presumed that good character inoculates against shifting fortune, and English has a rich vocabulary for expressing this belief: *steady, dependable, steadfast, unwavering, unflinching.* Conversely, the language generously supplies terms of abuse marking lack of character: *weak, fickle, disloyal, faithless, irresolute.* Such locutions imply that character will have regular behavioral manifestations: the person of good character will do well, even under substantial pressure to moral failure, while the person of bad character is someone on whom it would be foolish to rely. In this view it's character, more than circumstance, that decides the moral texture of a life; as the old saw has it, character is destiny.[2]

This conception of character is both venerable and appealing, but it is also deeply problematic. For me, this judgment is motivated by reflection on a longstanding "situationist" research tradition in experimental social psychology. A large part of my project is to articulate this tradition, but

situationism's fundamental observation can at the start be stated plainly enough: behavior is – *contra* the old saw about character and destiny – extraordinarily sensitive to variation in circumstance. Numerous studies have demonstrated that minor situational variations have powerful effects on helping behavior: hurried passersby step over a stricken person in their path, while unhurried passersby stop to help (Darley and Batson 1973); passersby who find a bit of change stop to help a woman who has dropped her papers, while passersby who are not similarly fortunate do not (Isen and Levin 1972). Situations have also been shown to have a potent influence on harming: ordinary people are willing to torture a screaming victim at the polite request of an experimenter (Milgram 1974), or perpetrate all manner of imaginative cruelties while serving as guards in a prison simulation (Zimbardo et al. 1973). The experimental record suggests that situational factors are often better predictors of behavior than personal factors, and this impression is reinforced by careful examination of behavior outside the confines of the laboratory. In very many situations it looks as though personality is less than robustly determinative of behavior. To put things crudely, people typically lack character.

This matters for ethics. Divesting ethical reflection of an empirically discredited psychology of character will facilitate emotional, evaluative, and deliberative habits that are more defensible, more sensitive, and more conducive to ethically desirable behavior. The story I tell in service of this immodest conclusion comes in three parts. First I identify the conception of character at issue; then I evaluate the empirical evidence problematizing it; and finally I consider the ethical ramifications of this problematic. If my story turns out to be a good one, I'll have earned a substantive conclusion – the psychology and ethics of character require revision – and a methodological conclusion – ethical reflection is well served by interaction with the human sciences.

An Opinionated History of the Problem

Given the provenance of the issues, my discussion will not infrequently reference Aristotle's canonical discourses on character, particularly as found in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. But I'm not doing scholarly work, and I shouldn't wish to be judged so; while I think my readings are defensible, and for the most part quite standard, my interests are not exegetical, and I don't much consider the extraordinary scholarship Aristotle inspires. Nor do I provide detailed discussion for each of the many character ethics offered by Aristotle's intellectual heirs. Instead, I want to interrogate some historically prominent notions of character that continue to infuse a broad range of ethical thought.

The ongoing "renaissance of virtue" in English-speaking philosophy can be traced to 1958, when Anscombe (1958: 1–4) declared that moral

philosophy – then dominated by notions of duty and obligation variously descended from either Kant or the Utilitarians – was no longer a profitable enterprise and should be abandoned pending the development of an adequate "philosophy of psychology." For better or worse, few philosophers took Anscombe's advice. Instead, many followed her (1958: 8–9, 15) in urging a return to notions of virtue such as those found in Aristotle. In the decades following Anscombe's pronouncement, there has been a profusion of writing on character and virtue, including, in the hands of such writers as Williams (1973, 1985, 1993, 1995), Foot (1978), McDowell (1978, 1979), and MacIntyre (1984), some of the most perceptive and influential work in contemporary philosophy.[3] The cumulative effect was not simply a return of virtue to philosophy's center stage; more generally, moral psychology became a preoccupation of philosophical ethics, one that even writers not working directly in the virtue tradition were obliged to address (e. g., Railton 1984; Herman 1993: 23–44).

Speaking broadly, moral psychology is the study of motivational, affective, and cognitive capacities manifested in moral contexts; to put it another way, moral psychology investigates the psychological properties of moral agents.[4] Then philosophers working in moral psychology might be expected to engage the quantities of work on motivation, affect, and cognition produced in psychology departments. But this has not usually been the case. Indeed, just when renewed attention to character was provoking increased attention to moral psychology on the part of philosophers, research in personality and social psychology – including work by Milgram (1963, 1974), Vernon (1964), Mischel (1968), Peterson (1968), Latané and Darley (1970), Darley and Batson (1973), and Zimbardo et al. (1973) – began to problematize the notions of character on which much philosophical discussion depends. That a great majority of philosophers gave no indication of noticing this tension seems especially remarkable when we observe that some of these studies, such as Milgram's obedience experiments and Zimbardo's prison experiment, caused a considerable stir in the popular press.[5] I suspect the philosophical complacency was mostly due to the relatively benign neglect typical of relationships between specialized academic departments, but some indifference was more willful. On the occasions where the relevant psychology did receive philosophical comment, the tone ranged from hostile (Patten 1977a, b) to skeptical (Alston 1975; Morelli 1983, 1985), with the general consensus being that the empirical work was of limited relevance for ethics (Schoeman 1987; Kupperman 1991: 172).

By the 1990s, numerous writers – including Gibbard (1990: 58–61), Flanagan (1991), Goldman (1993), Johnson (1993), Stich (1993), Railton (1995), Bok (1996), Doris (1996, 1998), Becker (1998), Blackburn (1998: 36–7), Campbell (1999), Harman (1999), Merritt (1999, 2000), and Vranas (2001) – were beginning to take seriously the idea that ethics ought to take empirical psychology seriously.[6] But with the exception of Flanagan's (1991)

pioneering survey, moral philosophers have not typically engaged empiri-
cal psychology in anything remotely approaching the depth required to see
exactly where and how it might matter for ethics. In philosophy, the devil is
always in the details; if the prospects for empirically informed approaches
to ethics are to be fairly assessed, we require closer contact with the empiri-
cal nitty gritty. At the same time, previous accounts have tended to a rather
decorous reserve; the issues can, and should, be put more pointedly.[7] What
is needed – and what I mean to provide – is a study that is at once a little
more painstaking and a little more insistent than what has gone before.

   The trend (as I presume to call it) toward empirically informed ethics de-
rives from a variety of factors. The first is a reflection of serious doubts about
the prospects of philosophical ethics: moral philosophers – particularly
exponents of virtue ethics such as MacIntyre (1984: 11–22) and Williams
(1985: vii; cf. 1993: 11) – have for some while suspected that modern moral
philosophy has fallen into a certain malaise.[8] At the same time, philoso-
phers working in epistemology and the philosophy of mind have been pro-
ductively, if controversially, interfacing with the human sciences (Goldman
1978, 1986; Stich 1983, 1990, 1996; Churchland 1984, 1989). Unsurpris-
ingly, then, some students of ethics have taken a cue from their happily
employed colleagues in other areas of philosophy.

   But there's more behind the empirical turn in ethics than the mortal sins
of despair and envy; it also has principled philosophical motivations. For
much of the twentieth century, a large percentage of moral philosophers
were convinced by general arguments purporting to exclude empirical psy-
chology from ethical reflection. In the spirit of Hume (1740/1978: 469–70),
it was widely maintained that because science is primarily descriptive and
ethical inquiry is primarily prescriptive, there is an unbridgeable "logical
gap" between the *is* of the human sciences and the *ought* of ethics. However
much psychology may tell us about human beings, it was alleged, how the
beings in question should comport themselves must remain – to borrow an
influential formulation of Moore's (1903: 15–21) – an "open question."

   The hegemony of such arguments has now been effectively disputed by
proponents of "ethical naturalism," who argue that empirical considerations
can, when handled with suitable delicacy, inform ethical reflection without
distorting its distinctively prescriptive character (e.g., Railton 1995).[9] As
with other "isms," it's not easy to say exactly what ethical naturalism is sup-
posed to come to, but my project is certainly naturalistic in spirit; I take it
that human beings and the ethical problems they encounter are in some
fairly substantial sense natural phenomena that may be illuminated by re-
course to empirical methodologies with affinities to those of the sciences.
These are not uncontroversial assumptions, and there are those who will
take umbrage. Some will insist that human beings are to be understood at
least in part as supernatural beings, and others, while accepting a naturalis-
tic view of humanity, will repudiate reliance on scientific methodologies in

ethical contexts. I find neither position particularly attractive, and in this I have diverse and respectable company, not improbably including Aristotle himself.[10] Nevertheless, I owe some defense of my methodological commitments. But this can be undertaken more profitably when my arguments are more fully in view, and we have a better sense of what transgressions need defending. Suffice for the moment to say that venerable philosophical prohibitions have recently been losing ground to new philosophical possibilities.

Talking about Character

There's quite an obvious reason for thinking empirical psychology relevant to character ethics: talk of character often carries descriptive baggage that looks to be the appropriate object of empirical assessment. Attributing a quality of character invokes a depiction of behavior and psychology: The brave person acts distinctively, with distinctive motives, affects, and cognitions. Attributions also underwrite explanation and prediction: Knowing something about a person's character is supposed to render their behavior intelligible and help observers determine what behaviors to expect. But matters are complicated, because talk of character is a "thick" discourse, intermingling evaluative and descriptive elements (Williams 1985: 128–31, 140–5). Terms like "brave," "treacherous," and "honest" typically bear evaluation as well as description – it's actually rather hard to think of character attributions that are readily understood as evaluatively neutral. Moreover, there are uses of character discourse that seem entirely free of descriptive intent; I might call someone "honest" pointedly, pleadingly, or even threateningly, if I'm in his hearing and he's been slow to repay a loan. Evaluative appeals to character are undoubtedly important, and I'll discuss them in more detail later on. But whatever its evaluative or prescriptive shadings, talk of character is very naturally understood to be descriptively freighted, just as the notion of a "thick" character discourse implies.

This understanding is buttressed by a look at the philosophical literature; advocates of character ethics seem to quite often, and quite unabashedly, indulge in descriptive psychological claims. Consider MacIntyre (1984: 199):

[T]o identify certain actions as manifesting or failing to manifest a virtue or virtues is never only to evaluate; it is also to take the first step towards explaining why those actions rather than some others were performed. Hence . . . the fate of a city or an individual can be explained by citing the injustice of a tyrant or the courage of its defenders. Indeed without allusion to the place that justice and injustice, courage and cowardice play in human life very little will be genuinely explicable. It follows that many of the explanatory projects of the modern social sciences, a methodological canon of which is the separation of "the facts" . . . from all evaluation, are bound to fail. For the fact that someone was or failed to be courageous or just cannot be recognized as "a fact" by those who accept that methodological canon.

On this characterization, the moral philosopher and social scientist share an important aspiration: the explanation of behavior (see also Wright 1963: 150; McDowell 1978: 14–22; Moody-Adams 1990: 111). Indeed, MacIntyre is apparently alleging that philosophers may go further than social scientists in realizing such aspirations. So where proffered explanations conflict, it's fair to ask which are better. I'll argue that philosophical explanations referencing character traits are generally inferior to those adduced from experimental social psychology. But the difficulty with character explanations is not, as MacIntyre has the social scientist allege, the breaching of a clearly demarcated distinction between facts and values. The boundary between factual and evaluative inquiry is not sharply delineated, and both philosophers and psychologists have argued that viable explanatory projects do not always religiously observe such a divide.[11] The problem with character explanations, in my view, is rather less philosophically delicate: They presuppose the existence of character structures that actual people do not very often possess. Or so I try to show in subsequent chapters. My present aim is not to critique the commitments in descriptive psychology associated with character ethics, but only to establish that they exist. For if such commitments are in evidence, there are aspects of character ethics that are appropriately subject to empirical scrutiny.

Discussion of character and virtue is perhaps most familiar in the context of child rearing and education, where it is frequently claimed that moral instruction facilitates character development. Aristotle (1984: e.g., 1103b7–30) conceived of ethical training as developing the habits of emotion, deliberation, and action proper to virtue.[12] His contemporary followers expound similar views: Moral instruction aims at inculcating good character (see McDowell 1979: 333; 1996; Sherman 1989: 157–99; Nussbaum 1999: 174, 187). Bennett (1993: 13–14) has reaffirmed this in a popular context to best-selling effect: "[T]he central task of education is virtue." Such talk easily admits of – indeed, cries out for – empirical evaluation. A claim that a particular sort of training has a particular effect on developing psychologies sure as hell looks like a claim to be discussed on the basis of evidence, and with school districts allocating scarce educational dollars, it is scarcely churlish to demand a well-substantiated account of how – and how likely – it is that our children will arrive at the happy state of virtue. I'll save the details and difficulties for later. At this point it is enough to notice that central commitments of character ethics are very naturally understood descriptively; the empirical investigation I advocate is one the tradition invites.

The Troubles with Psychology

Acknowledging that moral psychology is empirically accountable is not yet to agree that it is accountable to experimental psychology. A general skepticism

about experimental psychology is not without plausibility and may be derived from two very different sources. The first source concerns psychology's claim to scientific status; when compared with advances in the natural sciences, psychology has exhibited little uncontroversial progress. The second source also concerns psychology's claim to scientific status, but this time the worry is that psychology is rather too much like a science to accommodate the unruly textures of human life. The first difficulty is particularly worrisome; I'm effectively claiming that philosophical moral psychology will benefit from an encounter with psychology more "scientific" than its customary armchair speculation, so if psychology were bust as a science, my position would be awkward. I think the second difficulty is more easily dispensed with, so I'll begin there.

Psychology as Science, in a Pejorative Sense

Modern experimental psychology, if science it be, is science in the Western tradition. Accordingly, it reflects the prejudices of that tradition – presuppositions about standards of evidence, the nature of rationality, and so on. Insofar as these presuppositions structure the practice of experimental psychology, it might be said, the practice can make only poor sense of cultures and subcultures not sharing in the tradition.[13] A fair worry, this: Certainly there are enough examples of botched ethnography to raise doubts about the Western academy's capacity to get other cultures right (see Hacking 1999: 207–23). But psychologists are not oblivious to such pitfalls; social psychologists in particular have quite explicitly addressed problems raised by cultural differences.[14] No doubt such work risks parochial distortion, but not because social psychologists blithely assume that all peoples are the psychological equivalents of the Man on Main Street.

I needn't file a general brief for the multicultural sensitivity of psychologists. For the present dialectic, the point is that those in the character business are in no position to make charges of parochialism. Character ethics seems to have thrived in much the same milieu as experimental psychology: American and English academic departments and environs. Indeed, later on we will see that the conception of character at issue is substantially a cultural peculiarity, one considerably more prominent in Western cultures than in East Asian ones. (Not incidentally, this has been empirically demonstrated by social psychologists.) Then the dialogue I propose is less cross-cultural than intracultural; whatever the limits on scientific investigation of culture, they are not especially troublesome here.

But experimental psychology's troubles are not limited to cultural translation; some critics argue that the psychology experiment is a poor tool for studying even the culture of which it is a part.[15] The experimental literature often focuses on "objectively measurable" behavior rather more than on the psychological processes underlying behavior, an emphasis that raises the much-reviled specter of Skinner's (1953: 30) and Ryle's (1949) behaviorism.

Moreover, it's not even clear that the experimentalist is well situated to tell us much about behavior; critics insist that laboratory manipulations involving small numbers of subjects on isolated occasions cannot be expected to tell us what people are likely to do outside the lab's pretend universe. Although a balanced look at the experimental literature – or at least the best of it – makes this rhetoric look hyperbolic, charges of experimental artificiality ring of truth. But how much truth can be decided only by considering the details of the experiments in question, so a final verdict awaits more concrete discussion. For now, I'll readily admit it: Experimental psychology is perhaps the worst available method for understanding human life. Except, I hasten to add, for all the other methods.

The question is, what exactly are the alternatives? Some philosophers, particularly those working in the virtue tradition, think that literature can vivify ethical reflection (MacIntyre 1984: 238–43; Nussbaum 1999: 175). Allegedly, literary narratives and nonfictional histories can tell us more about the lives we lead than the "A desires X" and "S knows that P" schematics common to philosophy. There's something to this thought, and I will eventually appeal to both literature and history, but neither is a philosophical panacea. Literary and historical narratives are often more richly textured than philosopher's concoctions, but their rhetorical function in philosophical writing is typically much the same as more standard philosophical fare: Tell a story and invite the reader to share in a response.[16] Whatever the source of the story, this tactic is structurally similar to the "thought experiment" or "intuition pump" that has long been the methodological coin of the philosophical realm (see Dennett 1984: 17–18). And whatever the source of the story, there is cause for anxiety regarding the status of the resulting intuitions. Although I admire the philosophical purity of those who do, I won't pursue a general skepticism about intuitions. Like it or not, intuitions represent the lived phenomenology of ethical life, and whatever status intuitions are ultimately assigned in an ethical perspective, any perspective that ignores them risks distortion and sterility. Nevertheless, the method of the thought experiment makes me uneasy.

When philosophers pump intuitions, the court of appeal is very often what I call the "philosophical we." To readers of moral philosophy, such appeals are familiar, perhaps so familiar they pass unremarked: "We" would certainly approve of this person or this behavior, and "we" would certainly disapprove of that person and that behavior.[17] The philosophical "we," like the royal "we," seems meant to convey a sense of authority, and as with the royal "we," it is not untoward to ask from whence this entitlement comes. The locution, I guess, articulates a hoped-for agreement between writer and reader, but this looks a slight consensus by which to constrain ethical theory. Perhaps the consensus is expected to extend from the small group of philosophical discussants to others made familiar with the example, but in what manner is it determined how devoutly and widely the relevant intuitions

are actually held? This looks to me like an empirical question, and one not compellingly answered by guesswork. At this point, I can hear traditionalists asking whether I mean for philosophers to administer polls. Well, why not? Psychologists have investigated moral intuitions, and some of the results invite uneasy reflection. For example, Haidt and associates (1993) found that moral intuitions about examples of aberrant behavior varied with the socioeconomic status of respondents; could responses to standard philosophical thought experiments be similarly parochial?[18]

Of course, philosophers don't just report intuitions; they argue for them (though the wag will note that a favored form of philosophical argument charges the opposition with failing to accommodate an important intuition[19]). As I've said, I don't mean to quarrel with the use of intuitions per se. It's just that intuition pumps are an obvious instance where the philosophical method is highly speculative. Rather than doing away with reflection on intuitions, I urge augmenting such speculation with less speculative methodologies. Instead of merely reporting how character and behavior seem to them, or how they think such things seem to others, philosophers might try to see how these seemings compare with systematic observation of behavior and interpersonal perception. In undertaking such a project, they will certainly want to consult experimental psychology.[20] Whatever its shortcomings, it's hard to believe that the psychology experiment is more artificial than the thought experiment or more likely to distort human actualities than literary fictions. But the proof, of course, will have to wait for the pudding; my challenge, as I go along, will be to show how experimental work can help motivate a suitably rich moral psychology.

Psychology as Nonscience, in a Pejorative Sense
Even if one agrees in principle that philosophical moral psychology could benefit from reference to systematic empirical research, there are doubts as to whether experimental psychology is a promising reference point. Such skepticism is not simply the carping of an unsympathetic critic; pessimism about the progress of psychology is frequently voiced within the human sciences. As one psychologist laments, it's "hard to avoid the conclusion that psychology is a kind of shambling, poor relation of the natural sciences" (Lykken 1991: 14).[21] If this is the self-image of psychologists, why should philosophers look to them for help?

My view of psychology is, while not without reservation, rather less melancholy. Unfortunately, disabusing psychologists of their progress envy would require doing a lot more history and philosophy of science than I can take on here, but I will try to explain why I don't share their anxiety. Regarding my project, the doubter might proceed on one, or all, of three levels, targeting the entire discipline of psychology, the situationist experimental tradition, or particular situationist experiments. Again, close experiment-by-experiment discussion will be most profitable; without it, we

get only a vague and imperfect sense of how – or if – the more sweeping criticisms apply. There will be plenty of the close-in work as we go along; presently, I'll say a bit about the more ambitious charges.

At the most general level, it certainly looks as though the natural sciences have enjoyed a lot more success than have the human sciences. This is hard to deny – compare the advance of somatic medicine with the uncertainty of psychotherapy – but the contrast should not be accepted too easily.[22] Psychology is rife with controversy and has seen its share of now-discredited theories commanding an embarrassing amount of attention, but in this it is hardly unique. Is "animal magnetism" any more absurd than "phlogiston"? In the spirit of "constructivism," we can certainly ask what the critics mean by "progress": Is change in the natural sciences a sequence of ever closer approximations to some "objective reality" or merely an ever-shifting consensus cooperatively crafted by scientists and their constituents?[23] While it is certainly fair to observe that the notion of progress on which arguments from relative progress depend is itself the subject of argument, I am not advocating a tendentious constructivism in the philosophy of science. In important regards, the natural sciences have obviously enjoyed more progress than the human sciences: They predict their subject phenomena more accurately and manipulate them more effectively (see Rosenberg 1988: 6–7). But it remains a matter for discussion what this disparity tells us about the status of psychology.

Scientific psychology, at perhaps a hundred years old, is a "younger" discipline than chemistry, biology, and physics; perhaps there is room to hope that psychology will eventually manifest more orderly progress. However, not all psychologists think of their discipline as an especially young one, nor does the position of psychology look particularly favorable when compared with other scientific youths like modern genetics (Lykken 1991: 13; Ross and Nisbett 1991: 6; cf. Rosenberg 1988: 11). The troubling disparities in progress are not due simply to psychology's adolescent awkwardness, but there exists a plausible explanation for its relatively fitful progress: The subject matter of soft psychology is actually harder than the subject matter of the hard sciences. Given the complexity of social, psychological, and neural systems, humanity is in many regards a trickier subject than rocks, plants, or rats (Lykken 1991: 16). But complexity is itself a slippery notion: Is the subject matter of the human sciences more complex than high energy particle physics? Moreover, complexity is not inevitably associated with halting scientific advance. In natural science increasingly complex theoretical and experimental constructs have resulted in *accelerated* progress; modern physics looks to be both more complex and more successful than the physics of simpler times (Rosenberg 1988: 11).

Nonetheless, the scientific study of human beings faces distinctive obstacles. Perhaps most philosophically vexing is the "multiple realizability" problem familiar from the philosophy of mind: A single psychological

function might be subserved by different brain structures (Fodor 1975: 15–19; Chalmers 1996: 97–8). Thus, people who have been sorted on some dimension of psychological interest may not be physiologically isomorphic, that is, highly similar in a relevant physical respect (Lykken 1991: 16–18).[24] For example, despite the institutional weight and research dollars behind the medicalization of psychological disorder, at this writing I am not aware of a single biological test for the diagnosis of mental illness.[25] For better or worse, there is no periodic table for the structurally determinative elements of behavior. Of course, things change, and psychology may someday be, as many seem to hope, more neatly ordered by brain science. In the meantime, though, the going is less certain than in the more "physical" sciences.

Moreover, ethical considerations constrain psychological experimentation and prevent the imposition of important controls much more than in natural science (Meehl 1991: 17). Psychologists cannot – morally cannot – breed a genetically manipulated human population for systematic study as is done with plants or rats, nor may they systematically abuse children to gain a more systematic picture of the effects of abuse. Even where experimental work is ethically defensible, the psychology experiment is, in its own way, nearly as unruly a social environment as that outside the lab. The "human factor" in the human sciences inhibits the replication of experiments and the imposition of systematic experimental control; seemingly trivial variations in the experimental environment, such as the age and demeanor of the experimenter, may affect results (see Mussen and Scodel 1955; Bernstein 1956; Lykken 1991: 16).

These various disanalogies may be taken to indicate that the human and natural sciences should be understood as fundamentally different endeavors with fundamentally different aims and standards of success. In one view of social science, its goals are substantially predictive and manipulative, and it is therefore reasonably compared with the natural sciences. In another view, the goals of the human sciences are primarily interpretive, so contrasts with the predictive and manipulative successes of natural science are misbegotten.[26] While the "interpretive interpretation" allows psychology to avoid some unflattering comparisons, it seems rather a stretch, especially with regard to prediction. Human life is fraught with predictive problems – think of driving down the street, making a date, or asking for a favor – so it would be rather surprising, not to say disappointing, if human scientists were uninterested in issues that so interest other human beings. In fact, psychologists very often take themselves to be in the prediction business, just as practitioners in other sciences do; a familiar format in professional journals has the investigator announcing her preexperimental predictions before reporting the data.

Maybe prediction is a game psychologists play less well than natural scientists.[27] But problems in one special science do not imply that other

special sciences are better suited for achieving its aims. Again, we need to consider the alternatives. Impressive as they are, physics and chemistry do not purport to tell us much about human behavior. Neuroscience and evolutionary biology have made a deep impression on philosophers, but neither discipline is presently in a position to provide anything even distantly like a comprehensive accounting of human functioning, if indeed they ever will be.[28] In short, we hardly suffer an embarrassment of riches, and even critics acknowledge that psychology has made important contributions to the understanding of human behavior (e.g., Meehl 1991: 17–18); for example, it's not absurd to think that both Freudian dynamic psychiatry and Skinnerian behaviorism have garnered valuable insights. Now these approaches conflict, and such heated disagreement across major research programs is supposed to indicate failure of cumulative progress in psychology. But matters admit of happier coloration. The dynamic theorist can acknowledge the importance of environment, and any but the most doctrinaire behaviorist can acknowledge the importance of psychological dynamics. There is not at this time a consensus on the basics of human psychology, but perhaps there is emerging an increasingly clear picture of what a viable consensus would have to include, and have to leave out.

In the end, talk of aspirations for "psychology" – or the failure of those aspirations – is rather unhelpful, because psychology is, just as the critic impressed with its persistent controversy observes, a remarkably heterogeneous field. Sweeping verdicts on the discipline are unlikely to accurately reflect what different subfields are accomplishing or failing to accomplish. More enlightening discussion will proceed with attention to individual research programs and particular experiments. Let's begin to consider the research program I'm following here.

Scientific Psychology and Common Sense

Often enough, professional psychologists and lay people are up to much the same things: interpreting, predicting, and manipulating behavior. And these are things amateurs seem to do pretty well; indeed, psychologists sometimes understand their work as elaborating on the psychological theorizing practiced by lay people. Unsurprisingly, then, "common sense" is a keenly felt constraint in psychology, and this has served to put the situationist psychology I expound at a certain rhetorical disadvantage, inasmuch as it threatens time-honored notions of personality and character. According to one personality psychologist, situationism has brought us to "the strange position of denying our everyday experience and of accepting the laboratory as reality, no matter the absurdities to which it leads us" (Epstein 1979a: 649–50; cf. Allport 1966: 1). Just as everyday ethical convictions may serve as a constraint on ethical theory, it is alleged that everyday convictions about personality constrain psychological theorizing.

Of course, there is legitimate cause for suspicion when scientific work "undermines the appearances" willy-nilly, since the undermined appearances have long helped people to get around in the world. Accordingly, if the scientist means to convince an audience that the way things seem to ordinary folk is misleading, the scientist had better have an account of why things seem as they do: The physicist's claim that my cupboard door is mostly empty space will seem more plausible if it comes with an account of why the door feels so regrettably solid when I bang my head on it. Similarly, a critique of "common sense" conceptions of character will be more persuasive if accompanied by an explanation of why such misguided notions persist.[29] I eventually offer some such explanation. For now, remember that conformity to common sense is not an unequivocal mark of disciplinary health; it is perhaps no accident that both psychology and philosophy are simultaneously infused with doxastic considerations and plagued with accusations of fitful progress.

While I am mostly unimpressed by bald appeals to common sense, there are more principled doubts about the implications of situationist laboratory experiments for thinking about the "everyday experience" of personality and behavior in natural contexts. As I've said, it is questionable whether the productions of experimental artifice allow meaningful generalizations outside the laboratory, and these concerns may seem especially pressing on the situationist perspective. If behavior is as context-dependent as the situationist argues, how can any experiment, including the situationist's own, motivate any general conclusions about human behavior (Epstein 1983: 362–3; 1996: 445)? Notice that this way of putting the question poses a dilemma for the critic. Either situationism is false, in which case there are not pressing concerns about generalization from experimental settings, and the situationist's experiments deserve to be taken seriously, or the truth of situationism implies that it is impossible to draw defensible generalizations from situationist experiments, in which case situationism is conceded from the outset and requires no experimental support.

Sophistry aside, charges of theoretical overgeneralization are not easily applicable to situationism, which derives from a substantial and diverse body of experimental work, including many naturalistic field studies, dating to the 1920s.[30] My argument does not stand or fall with an experiment or two, and any attempted refutation must engage a large body of research. As far as I can see, there is no general methodological consideration fit to dispense with this research en masse; credible argument must proceed experiment by experiment and case by case. The technique I employ is an inductive skepticism, and like any inductive argument, it cannot be used to rule out the possibility of future developments that contravene it (see Alston 1975: 36, 42). Things could hardly be otherwise: If my account is empirically supportable, it should be empirically falsifiable. But given the extent of the empirical support I adduce here, I believe I've good reason for believing that falsification is not forthcoming.

Strange Bedfellows

It should by now be evident that my philosophical sympathies are, in some generic sense, empiricist. I think systematic observation should be a powerful constraint on theory construction even in cases where it disturbs received opinion or conflicts with other theoretical desiderata. But surprisingly, my empirically motivated skepticism about character resonates with numerous writers of a decidedly less than hard-headed empiricist persuasion.

Literary and cultural theorists, especially of the "postmodernist" or "post-structuralist" variety, have voiced skepticism about the notion of a unified or integrated self; on some interpretations modernity (or the transition from modernity to postmodernity) chronicles the "dissolution" of character (see Markovic 1970: 154; Bersani 1976: 313; Harvey 1989: 52–4; Jameson 1991; Raper 1992). Psychologists have been enamored of similar ideas: Gergen (1991: 6–7) argues that modernity is characterized by a "fragmentation of self-conceptions"; the modern self is "saturated" by the conflicting demands of multiple social roles and is thereby reduced to "no self at all." Similarly, Craib (1994: 110–12, 132) worries that the "highly variegated" character of modern experience results in fragmented selves in danger of "falling apart."[31]

Not everyone will be impressed with the company I'm keeping at this point. Indeed, as a philosopher preoccupied with analytic argumentation and empirical evidence, I'm not entirely impressed myself. But the convergence is worth noting. For if the experimental social psychology on which I rely were somehow discredited, the skepticism about character it motivates could persist on very different methodological fronts. There's a lot of bears at the dump. It's worth asking what's bringing them around.