Lack of Character

Personality and Moral Behavior

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Moral Character, Moral Behavior

> The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.
>
> Hannah Arendt

Totalitarianism specializes in the dissolution of fortitude, whether by the extremes of physical torture (Bettelheim 1943) or by the psychological degradation of "thought reform" or "brainwashing" (Lifton 1956; Schein 1956). These practices are repellent, but their effects are not unexpected. Aristotle (1984: 1115b7–9) acknowledged that some things exceed human endurance, and Russell (1945: 267), with another 2,000-odd years of history to consider, remarked that the will withstands the tyrant only so long as the tyrant is unscientific. Situationism teaches something more surprising and, in a sense, more disturbing. The unsettling observation doesn't concern behavior in extremis, but behavior in situations that are rather less than extreme; the problem is not that substantial situational factors have substantial effects on what people do, but that seemingly insubstantial situational factors have substantial effects on what people do. The disproportionate impact of these "insubstantial" situational factors presses charges of empirical inadequacy against characterological moral psychology: If dispositional structures were typically so robust as familiar conceptions of character and personality lead one to believe, insubstantial factors would not so frequently have such impressive effects. In the present chapter, I'll document the evidence for this contention.

Prelude: Character and Compassion

On a March night in 1963, Catherine Genovese was stabbed to death. Her killer attacked her three times over a period of 35 minutes. Despite Genovese's clearly audible screams, 37 of 38 witnesses in her middle-class

Queens neighborhood did not so much as call the police; one, after first calling a friend for advice, notified authorities only when the attacks had ended and Genovese was mortally wounded (Rosenthal 1999). While there is room for controversy over just what compassion consists in, I suspect few would deny that complete inaction when a screaming young woman is slowly butchered nearby problematizes its attribution. As opposed to compassion the emotional syndrome, which may be quite transitory, compassion the character trait is a stable and consistent disposition to perform beneficent actions (Blum 1994: 178–80); failures to behave compassionately when doing so is appropriate and not unduly costly are evidence against attributing the trait.

The experimental and historical records reveal that such omissions, as well as similarly incompassionate actions, commonly occur where the obstacles to compassion and the pressures to incompassion seem remarkably slight: the failures are disproportionate to the pressures. In the first instance, this problematizes thinking about compassion in terms of a robust character trait. If I'm right, however, compassion exemplifies a general problem for characterological moral psychology. I'll treat compassion as a sort of test case.

In part, this strategy is opportunistic: There are quantities of empirical work on compassion-relevant behavior. I'm not merely an opportunist, however; as a core ethical concern on a variety of evaluative perspectives, compassion is a natural locus of discussion. Somewhat awkwardly for me, compassion does not appear in Aristotle's discussion of virtues, but I think it would be a mistake to suppose that he had no interest in the sort of concerns associated with compassion.[1] For example, while Aristotle's magnanimous man is decidedly not a compassionate saint, Aristotle (1984: 1123b30–4) insists such a person will not wrong others; it would be surprising if Aristotle expected him to brutalize innocents or stand by while others do so. Behaviors associated with compassion are of substantial interest for any ethical perspective that emphasizes other-regarding concern, that is, most any recognizably ethical perspective. There may be those who reject this characterization of ethics, but there's little doubt that they are in the minority.[2]

My arguments are not contingent on any particular understanding of compassion; I could as easily couch discussion in terms of what psychologists rather colorlessly call "prosocial behavior" (e.g., Bar-Tal 1976: 3–9; Piliavin et al. 1981: 3–4), inasmuch as ethical reflection is preoccupied with such conduct. Moreover, my arguments do not depend on assuming any especially demanding ethical standard. Unlike "heroic" virtues such as courage, compassion is the subject of quite commonplace ethical demands, demands that are customarily applied to ordinary people in ordinary circumstances. The problem that the empirical work presents is not widespread failure to meet heroic standards – perhaps this would come as no surprise – but

widespread failure to meet quite modest standards. All things considered, my test case should resonate rather broadly.

With this backdrop in mind, it's time for the empirical evidence.[3] I beg the reader's indulgence in a long-winded discussion; this is the only way to responsibly assess a vast experimental literature.

Helping Behavior

Mood Effects

Imagine a person making a call in a suburban shopping plaza. As the caller leaves the phone booth, along comes Alice, who drops a folder full of papers that scatter in the caller's path. Will the caller stop and help before the only copy of Alice's magnum opus is trampled by the bargain-hungry throngs? Perhaps it depends on the person: Jeff, an entrepreneur incessantly stalking his next dollar, probably won't, while Nina, a political activist who takes in stray cats, probably will. Nina is the compassionate type; Jeff isn't. In these circumstances we expect their true colors to show. But this may be a mistake, as an experiment by Isen and Levin (1972) shows. There the paper-dropper was an experimental assistant, or "confederate." For one group of callers, a dime was planted in the phone's coin return slot; for the other, the slot was empty. Here are the results (after Isen and Levin 1972: 387):

	Helped	Did Not Help
Found dime	14	2
Did not find dime	1	24

If greedy Jeff finds the dime, he'll likely help, and if compassionate Nina doesn't, she very likely won't. The situation, more than the person, seems to be making the difference.[4]

On Isen and Levin's (1972: 387) reading, the determinative impact of finding the dime proceeds by influencing affective states; apparently, this small bit of good fortune elevates mood, and "feeling good leads to helping."[5] Numerous studies have shown that mood can have powerful impacts on a wide variety of human functioning: risk taking (Isen and Geva 1987), memory (Isen et al. 1978), cooperative behavior (Carnevale and Isen 1986), and problem solving (Taylor 1991; Isen 1987). Most relevantly, positive affect has repeatedly been shown to be related to prosocial behavior (Aderman 1972: 98–9; Isen 1987: 206–7).[6] The crucial observation is not that mood influences behavior – no surprise there – but just how unobtrusive the stimuli that induce the determinative moods can be. Finding a bit of change is something one would hardly bother to remark on in describing one's day, yet it makes the difference between helping and not.[7]

Related studies suggest that people are more likely to help when exposed to pleasant aromas (Baron and Bronfen 1994; Baron and Thomley 1994; Baron 1997). Baron and Thomley (1994: 780) suspect that the mediating factor is positive affect: Good smells induce good moods, which facilitate prosocial behavior. Once again, a rather trivial situational factor may have a nontrivial impact on prosocial behavior; Baron (1997: 500–1) found subjects near a fragrant bakery or coffee shop more likely to change a dollar bill when asked than those near a neutral-smelling dry goods store. If one must have trouble, best to have it where homey scents abound![8]

Back to our troublesome dime. Are Isen and Levin's nonhelpers behaving incompassionately? Scattered papers are a less-than-dire predicament, so the omission is not serious.[9] On the other hand, the cost of action is low: Help round up the papers and be on your way. And if you've endured the humiliation of scrabbling after scattered papers on a busy street, you may regard such a mishap as one where compassionate behavior is appropriate. In numerous instances Isen and Levin's nonhelping subjects literally trampled the fallen papers; while the footprints they left behind may not be evidence of viciousness, they do seem to tell against the attribution of compassion.[10] Of course, the situation presents bystanders some difficulty in interpretation – would she like help, or would I embarrass her?[11] In fact, evidence suggests that situational ambiguity is likely to impede helping behavior: for example, individuals who hear an emergency may be less likely to help than those who both see and hear it (Shotland and Stebbins 1980: 519).[12] This does not undermine Isen and Levin's result, however. While a sensitive look at the circumstances may tell against judging the passive bystanders too harshly, it does not alter the facts: A mere dime strongly influenced compassion relevant behavior.

Unfortunately, the Isen and Levin subjects did not undergo personality evaluations, so there's no direct evidence regarding dispositional differences, or the lack of dispositional differences, between the helpers and the nonhelpers. But think for a moment of the data: Only 13 percent of dime finders failed to help, whereas 96 percent of nonfinders were similarly passive. Given these numbers, doesn't "He found a dime" look like a plausible, if incomplete, explanation of why Jeff the entrepreneur managed to help? Or are we to suppose that, of a more or less random sample of public phone users in a shopping mall, those possessing robust compassionate dispositions happened to luck into the dime, while their callous brethren didn't (cf. Campbell 1999: 39)?

Now one person did help, despite not finding a dime; perhaps the study shows only that compassionate people are few and far between. Virtue, Aristotle (1984: 1105a7–12) tells us, is difficult; the fact that compassion often fails to be manifested in behavior will not surprise any but the most starry-eyed romantic. But the cases I consider here, like the phone booth study, are ones where prosocial behavior looks to be "minimally decent samaritanism" (see Thomson 1971); the deeds in question do not require heroic commitment or sacrifice. I am not establishing a heroic standard for

good character and arguing from the rarity of this standard being achieved to a general skepticism about characterological moral psychology. Rather, there are problems for standards of character that are well short of heroic, and they are often found in very ordinary places, like the coin return of a public phone.

Group Effects

Another unsettling series of findings, partly instigated by public dismay over the Genovese murder, concern the oft-demonstrated inhibition of helping in groups, or "group effect."[13] In a representative experiment by Latané and Darley (1970: 44–54), puffs of artificial smoke were introduced through a wall vent into a room where undergraduate subjects were filling out forms. After several minutes there was enough smoke to "obscure vision, produce a mildly acrid odor, and interfere with breathing." When the subject was alone in the room, 75 percent (18 of 24) reported the smoke to experimenters within four minutes; when the subject was with two passive confederates, only 10 percent of subjects (1 of 10) reported it. In a trial with three naive subjects per group, in only 38 percent of groups did someone report the smoke, as opposed to the 98 percent one would expect statistically based on the 75 percent response rate in the alone condition. Latané and Darley (1970: 48–52) speculate that in this instance the group effect proceeded by influencing interpretative processes: Seeing confederates acting unconcerned, subjects were more inclined to interpret the "ambiguous" stimulus of artificial smoke as "nondangerous" steam or air conditioning vapors, despite the fact that it moved them to cough, rub their eyes, and open windows.[14]

A related study by Latané and Rodin (1969; cf. Latané and Darley 1970: 57–67) solicited Columbia University undergraduates for participation in a market research study. When they reported to the experimental site, an attractive[15] young woman introduced herself as a "market research representative," provided the subjects with some questionnaires to fill out, and withdrew behind a curtain dividing the room. Subjects were subsequently interrupted by a loud crash, followed by the woman's cries of pain. Apparently, this constituted an arresting and realistic impression of a serious fall taking place behind the curtain: Less than 5 percent of subjects reported suspecting that the victim's cries were recorded, as they in fact were. Seventy percent of bystanders offered help when they waited alone, compared with 7 percent in the company of an unresponsive confederate. When two subjects not previously acquainted waited together, in only 40 percent of groups did one of the subjects intervene, compared with the 91 percent expected based on a 70 percent rate when subjects were alone. Here, too, the group effect appeared to operate through the interpretative process: Nonhelpers said they were unsure of what happened or decided it was not serious. Accordingly, postexperimental interviews revealed that passive subjects did not feel as though they had acted callously: They typically claimed

they would readily help in a "real" emergency (Latané and Rodin 1969: 197).

Latané and Darley (1970: 95–100) also discovered a somewhat different effect. They asked students to participate in a group discussion of the problems faced by college students in an urban environment. The ostensible "discussion" proceeded by intercom with the experimenter absent and the subject isolated in a cubicle, ostensibly to preserve anonymity; in fact, the other "participants" were tape recordings, and the situation was designed to address a variant of the group effect. One tape-recorded participant described his difficulty with seizures; he later gave an arresting impression of someone suffering a seizure (1970: 97, 100). Again, the group effect: 100 percent of subjects believing themselves alone with the seizure victim intervened, while only 62 percent of subjects in a "group" consisting of subject, victim, and five more tape-recorded participants did so.

Apparently, in this case the inhibiting mechanism consisted at least partly in a "diffusion of responsibility" (Latané and Darley 1970: 101, 111): The presence of others meant that no individual was forced to bear full responsibility for intervention.[16] When the experimenter terminated each trial after 6 minutes, unresponsive subjects in group conditions appeared aroused and conflicted. Isolated in their cubicle, they lacked the social cues necessary to facilitate an interpretation congenial to inaction, but knowing there were other bystanders, it was not clear that intervention was up to them. In contrast, the passive bystanders in the previous two experiments, where social influence rather than diffusion of responsibility was the inhibiting factor, seemed relaxed; the presence of other passive bystanders assured them that their inaction was appropriate despite the considerable evidence to the contrary (Latané and Darley 1970: 111–12). Then the group effect involves more than one sort of effect. It is not simply that numbers of bystanders influence intervention; different configurations of bystanders may influence intervention in different ways.[17] The operative processes are doubtless complicated, but one general implication of the group effect studies seems fairly clear: Mild social pressures can result in neglect of apparently serious ethical demands.

Good Samaritans

In one of the most widely discussed situationist experiments, Darley and Batson (1973) invited students at the Princeton Theological Seminary to participate in a study of "religious education and vocations." Subjects began experimental procedures by filling out questionnaires in one building and then reported to a nearby building for the second part of the experiment, which consisted in their giving a short verbal presentation.[18] Before leaving the first site, subjects were told either that they were running late ("high hurry" condition), were right on time ("medium hurry" condition), or were a little early ("low hurry" condition); thus the conditions exerted a

different degree of time pressure on the subjects.[19] The behavior of interest occurred on the walk between the two sites, when each seminarian passed an experimental confederate slumped in a doorway, apparently in some sort of distress.

One might expect that most individuals training for a "helping profession" like the ministry would be strongly disposed to assist the unfortunate victim or at the very least inquire as to his condition.[20] Instead, helping varied markedly according to degree of hurry (Darley and Batson 1973: 105).[21]

	Degree of Hurry		
	Low	Medium	High
Percentage helping	63	45	10

It's no surprise that haste can have people paying less regard to others. But the apparent disproportion between the seriousness of the situational pressures and the seriousness of the omission is surprising: The thought of being a few minutes late was enough to make subjects not notice or disregard a person's suffering. The imagery recalls the most cynical caricatures of modern life: Darley and Batson (1973: 107) report that in some cases a hurried seminarian literally stepped over the stricken form of the victim as he hurried on his way!

It is difficult to resist situationist conclusions. Subjects were hurried but certainly not coerced. Nor was there special reason to think, in the green fields of 1970s Princeton, New Jersey, that the victim posed some threat, as might be supposed in more threatening urban climes. Similarly, the placid suburban environment should have worked to reduce situational ambiguity. While urbanites who are daily confronted with the homeless may find themselves wondering whether the unfortunate individual lying on the sidewalk is sick or dying as opposed to inebriated or sleeping, such sights were presumably uncommon enough in the Princeton of 1970 to strongly suggest that something was seriously amiss (cf. Campbell 1999: 28). But hurried seminarians failed to help. What was at stake for them? Did they somehow decide that their obligation to the experimenter trumped a general imperative to help others in distress? In its generality, this looks like a plausible interpretation, but it's hard to believe such an obligation could be viewed as very weighty: Subjects were volunteers being paid a modest $2.50, and the experimenter was someone they had only just met.[22] Once again, there is the appearance of disproportion; in this case the demands of punctuality seem rather slight compared with the ethical demand to at least check on the condition of the confederate.[23]

Helping and Personality

Between 1962 and 1982 more than 1,000 studies on helping behavior and altruism were reported in the psychology literature (Dovidio 1984: 362);

I confess with some embarrassment that the preceding discussion has reported only a fraction of the relevant material. However, my sampling is representative of established trends. As I've said, situationism is motivated by a pattern of results, not by the results of any particular study; I'm discussing some high points of the tradition, but there are many other studies that equally support my interpretation. I'll now say something more about how my interpretation goes.

It would be a serious mistake to understand the situationist experiments as empirical evidence against the existence of altruism. While egoistic theories of motivation are common enough in the social sciences,[24] I doubt questions about the possibility of altruism admit of empirical resolution, since the issue concerns what sort of motivations should be counted as altruistic, and this is substantially a conceptual difficulty. Still, there is a sense in which I might be accused of painting a misleadingly dreary picture of human behavior. The studies I've relied on, like most of those in the prosocial literature, involve helping behavior amongst strangers (see McGuire 1994). But of course much helping, and much human kindness, occurs in the context of social bonds: between friends, family, and coworkers. And here, perhaps, we are right to expect more compassion than we do amongst strangers: Surely I don't suppose that 90 percent of mothers in a hurry would step over the stricken form of their own child? Of course not; nothing I've said contradicts the thought that people help most, and are most helped by, the ones they know and love. Where social ties exist, helping is very likely more reliable than among strangers. At risk of churlishness, however, I cannot resist cautionary observations: Lovers cheat, siblings fight, and parents are unresponsive. More important, the situationist can grant even strong claims for the consistency of prosocial behavior in ongoing relationships, for surely the explanation here is substantially situational: Relationships underwrite affective ties and reciprocal structures that facilitate helping behavior. For all that, we find considerable helping even amongst strangers: Numerous studies of staged emergencies have found impressive rates of intervention, in some conditions approaching 100 percent (Piliavin et al. 1969: 292; Clark and Word 1972: 394–7; Harari et al. 1985: 656–7). The situationist point is not that helping is rare, but that helping is situationally sensitive.

As with all psychology experiments, the studies I've cited encounter questions of *ecological validity*: To what extent does a given experimental finding accurately reflect phenomena found in natural contexts?[25] Experimental situations are in many cases radically different from the natural situations they are meant to address; accordingly, applying experimental work to the interpretation of natural situations is an extrapolative process. As a (roughish) rule, the more closely the experimental situation resembles its natural counterpart, the more straightforward the extrapolation will be. At least initially, the experiments we've just considered seem to fare pretty well in this respect; for instance, the situation faced by subjects in the phone booth study bears

a more than passing similarity to the sort of helping situations people encounter in everyday life.

Field studies like the phone booth demonstration are less subject to worries about ecological validity than are lab studies like the seizure experiment, because subjects in laboratory experiments know they are in an "artificial" situation, an awareness that may influence how they judge and behave.[26] But ecological validity does not require that experimental situations resemble the relevant natural situations exactly or even very closely; more important for the purposes of generalization is whether the processes at issue in each case can plausibly be considered analogous. Nobody is arguing that the group effect studies are exactly like the Genovese tragedy; the point is that there is good reason to think closely related social processes are at work in both instances. More generally, it strains credulity not a bit to claim that people are influenced by mood, time pressures, and the presence of others in both natural and experimental contexts.

But I'm in the business of arguing something that does strain credulity a bit: seemingly insubstantial situational factors have extraordinary effects on behavior. This is undeniably true in experimental contexts, but I contend that it is quite generally true. I'm therefore making an extrapolation, but notice what is required to refute it: One would have to show not that the experimental contexts are different, or even vastly different, from the natural contexts, but that there are differences suggesting that situational factors are less powerful in natural contexts than they are in experimental contexts. Perhaps this can be argued in particular cases, but I suspect this is going to be difficult to establish for a preponderance of relevant experiments and, most especially, for the field studies: Is there some reason to suspect that Isen and Levin's dimes were unnaturally potent?

Indeed, there's an obvious explanation for why the disconcerting potency of small situational variations is more evident in experiments than in life. Given how counterintuitive it is to suppose that such factors powerfully influence behavior, it is no surprise that people typically pay them little attention, and even in the unlikely event that people developed situationist suspicions in the ordinary course of things, it would be difficult for them to engage in the systematic observation required to put such suspicions to the test. Conversely, this is just what experimental observation is designed to do; it's not that the experimentally identified phenomena are not present in natural contexts, but that they are not as readily there adduced.

Then I won't much worry here about ecological validity; for my purposes, the central interpretive issue concerns what experimental work on helping can tell us about the behavioral ramifications of character. Consider first the role of demographic variables like sex and socioeconomic status, a topic that has been the subject of some study. Now these demographic variables are not quite the same thing as character or personality traits, but if it were shown that such variables impacted helping behavior, it would appear to give the character theorist a foot in the door. Suppose women were reliably more helpful than men. It might then be tempting to conclude that women tend to have more robust compassionate dispositions than men, which is to say that variance along a trait dimension accounts for variance in helping behavior. However, the empirical evidence for a conjecture of this kind is rather weak. Some studies have found no relationship between sex and prosocial behavior, others have found more prosocial behavior on the part of men, and still others have found more prosocial behavior on the part of women.[27] In particular, this pattern or, rather, lack of a pattern, has been found over numerous studies of the group effect (Latané and Darley 1970: 104; Latané and Nida 1981: 315–16). In investigating other demographic correlates of helping, Latané and Darley (1970: 117–19) found that socioeconomic status is not strongly associated with helping behavior, although they do report a modest relationship between bystanders' hometowns and helping behavior, with bystanders hailing from smaller communities being more likely to help than bystanders from larger communities.[28] Perhaps the character theorist can find a glimmer of hope here – it might be argued that rural environments can effectively nurture robust compassionate dispositions – but overall the evidence provides little indication that demographic characteristics are an important determinant of helping behavior.

For the most part, attempts to directly relate personality evaluations to helping behavior have had similarly uncertain results (Krebs 1970: 284–5; Piliavin et al. 1981: 185–92). Darley and Batson (1973: 106) found little relationship between personality measures tapping "types of religiosity" and helping on the part of their seminarians.[29] Yakimovich and Saltz (1971: 428) found that various trait measures – including those for trustworthiness, independence, and altruism – were unrelated to helping in a staged accident paradigm. In the Latané and Darley (1970: 114–15) seizure study, measures of various personality traits – including authoritarianism, Machiavellianism, and social responsibility – failed to predict helping; in a variation conducted by Korte (1971: 155–6), measures of deference, autonomy, and ascendance did not predict helping behavior.

On the other hand, Denner (1968: 461–2) found that subjects exhibiting a low tolerance for ambiguity were less reluctant to report a theft than individuals with high tolerance, while Michelini and associates (1975: 256–7) discovered that individuals manifesting a high concern for esteem were more likely to assist someone who had dropped an armload of books than were individuals with high concern for safety. Based on a suggestive series of studies, Schwartz (e.g., Schwartz and Ben David 1976; Schwartz 1977) argues that individual tendencies to accept rather than deny responsibility are positively related to a range of prosocial behavior, including emergency

intervention and volunteer work. While there is empirical evidence for Schwartz's view, his results do not in every case seem especially strong (e.g., Schwartz and Clausen 1970: 306; Schwartz and Ben David 1976: 410–11), and they have not always been substantiated by other investigators (e.g., Zuckerman and Reis 1978: 505).

I do not contend that there is nothing to recommend personological approaches to prosocial behavior, but it seems more than fair to conclude that the results of this work are equivocal. As is often the case, interpretation of the evidence is to some extent a question of taste: One commentator's equivocal results are another's suggestive results. Obviously, I find evidence for the power of the situation highly suggestive and evidence for the power of personality highly equivocal; others might take the opposite view. I don't really think it's a tie, though: The situationist results we have seen, and those we see below, form a body of research that is undeniably striking, even on the most casual reading, while results having to do with personality and helping often seem rather modest even after application of powerful statistical techniques by sympathetic practitioners.

I must acknowledge an important limitation in the studies I've described: They typically address not patterns of behavior but a particular behavior in a particular situation. While such studies show that insubstantial situational factors may powerfully impact behavior, they can tell us nothing directly about the consistency of the subjects: Direct evidence for or against any particular individual's behavioral consistency requires systematic observation of that individual's behavioral patterns. To gather this sort of evidence, one requires longitudinal studies that observe individuals over a period of many years in numerous and diverse situations.[30] It cannot be denied that there is a dearth of such studies; they are all but prohibited by logistical obstacles, including high cost and professional pressure on academic investigators to "get quick results." Nevertheless, the situationist has a powerful indirect argument against the existence of widespread consistency in helping behavior. The prosocial literature provides unequivocal evidence that situations have powerful determinative impacts on behavior. Add to this the highly plausible speculation that people will typically experience situations with highly variable levels of conduciveness to prosocial behavior, and it seems eminently reasonable to conclude that people will typically exhibit inconsistent prosocial behavior.[31]

If I am right, then, characterological moral psychology is an empirically inadequate approach to the determinants of helping behavior. But the point needs to be put carefully. Flanagan (1991: 295, 302), a generally sympathetic commentator on situationism, cautions that results like Darley and Batson's have "no implications whatsoever for the general issue of whether there are personality traits." True enough. But the question concerns the most perspicuous characterization of personality traits, not their existence. The situationist does not deny that people have personality traits; she instead

denies that people typically have highly general personality traits that effect behavior manifesting a high degree of cross-situational consistency. It is not often going to be the case, as philosophers might be tempted to allege (see Feinberg 1992: 178), that those emerging as Failed Samaritans in some situation suffer a general "character flaw," while those presenting as Good Samaritans are motivated by a general "surplus of benevolence."

Of course, the research we've considered generates skepticism only about personality measures actually subjected to behavioral investigation. As I've said, my skepticism is inductive; accordingly, it leaves open the possibility of highly general personal influences on prosocial behavior that investigators have hitherto failed to discover. An inductive skepticism is a defeasible skepticism. All the same, folks have been at it a while; a situationist bet on future developments doesn't seem a wild gamble.

Destructive Behavior

The Milgram Experiments

So far, we have examined experimental manipulations which appear to generate omissions of compassion, failures to act where one might fairly expect a person of ordinary moral stature to do so. Social psychologists have also performed experimental manipulations of active harming behavior, laboratory inducements to destructive behaviors one would expect a person of ordinary moral stature to quite readily avoid. The classic studies in this vein are the famous, or infamous, "obedience experiments" conducted by Stanley Milgram.[32] While they are among the most widely recognized, and among the most important, of all psychological demonstrations, it is not obvious that we have come fully to grips with the notorious "experiments where they shocked people." Nor is it the case that philosophers have been especially engaged with Milgram's work, despite its apparent ethical significance.[33] Even among those intimately acquainted with the experiments, their interpretation is a matter of controversy, so I shall, at the risk of belaboring some well-known points, go into considerable detail.

For the impatient reader, I offer my main conclusions in advance.[34] Milgram's experiments show how apparently noncoercive situational factors may induce destructive behavior despite the apparent presence of contrary evaluative and dispositional structures. Furthermore, personality research has failed to find a convincing explanation of the Milgram results that references individual differences. Accordingly, Milgram gives us reason to doubt the robustness of dispositions implicated in compassion-relevant moral behavior; his experiments are powerful evidence for situationism. For the patient reader, I'll now substantiate these conclusions in considerable detail.

From 1960 to 1963, Milgram (1974: 1–26) ran various permutations of his experiment with approximately 1,000 subjects drawn from various socioeconomic groups in the New Haven area – postal clerks, high school