

Social Psychology, Mood, and Helping: Mixed Results for Virtue Ethics

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Abstract I first summarize the central issues in the debate about the empirical adequacy of virtue ethics, and then examine the role that social psychologists claim positive and negative mood have in influencing compassionate helping behavior. I argue that this psychological research is compatible with the claim that many people might instantiate certain character traits after all which allow them to help others in a wide variety of circumstances. Unfortunately for the virtue ethicist, however, it turns out that these helping traits fall well short of exhibiting certain central features of compassion.

Keywords Character · Doris · Harman · Situationism · Social psychology

1 Introduction

The central virtue at issue in recent philosophical discussions of the empirical adequacy of virtue ethics has been the virtue of compassion. Opponents of virtue ethics such as Gilbert Harman and John Doris argue that experimental results from social psychology concerning helping behavior are best explained not by appealing to so-called “global” character traits like compassion, but rather to external situational forces or, at best, to highly individualized “local” character traits.¹

In response, a number of philosophers have argued that virtue ethics can accommodate the empirical results in question, and have focused their attention in particular on explaining away the purported threat posed by the Milgram shock experiments, the Zimbardo prison experiments, and the Darley and Batson helping

¹ See Doris (1998, 2002), Campbell (1999), and Harman (1999, 2000). The distinction between global versus local character traits will be examined in section one below.

experiments.² On the other hand, very little has been said about certain well-known mood effect experiments, experiments which figure prominently in Doris's attack on virtue ethics and which generate data that I take to be among the most challenging for virtue ethicists to accommodate.³ Thus the point of this paper is to examine these experiments in detail with an aim to determining what bearing, if any, they have on the viability of virtue ethics.

In what follows, I first summarize the central issues in the debate about the empirical adequacy of virtue ethics, and then in sections two and three go on to discuss the role that social psychologists claim positive and negative mood have in influencing compassionate helping behavior. Section four then examines a number of preliminary implications that such results seem to have for virtue ethics, while section five is reserved for the most significant implication, namely that many people might instantiate certain character traits after all which allow them to help others in a wide variety of circumstances. Unfortunately for the virtue ethicist, it turns out that these helping traits fall well short of exhibiting certain central features of compassion. Finally, by way of conclusion, I briefly suggest where virtue ethicists can go from here.

2 Background

In his recent book *Lack of Character*, Doris argues against the empirical adequacy of virtue ethics in particular and of any ethical theory more generally which ascribes a substantive role to global character traits. According to Doris, a *globalist* conception of character is one which accepts the following two theses in particular:

- (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.⁴ (Doris 2002, p. 22).

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

² See, among others, DePaul (1999), Athanassoulis (2001), Sreenivasan (2002), Miller (2003), Kamtekar (2004), and Sabini and Silver (2005). For the experiments, see Milgram (1963), Zimbardo et al. (1973), and Darley and Batson (1973).

³ See Doris (1998, p. 504) and Doris (2002, pp. 30–32).

⁴ Doris also mentions a third globalist claim:

- (3) *Evaluative integration*: In a given character or personality the occurrence of a trait with a particular evaluative valence is probabilistically related to the occurrence of other traits with similar evaluative valences.

Thus according to this claim, a person who is honest, for example, would also be expected to have and manifest other character traits relevant to honesty, such as understanding, wisdom, and courage (Ibid.).

However, evaluative integration is controversial even among virtue ethicists, and it is the first two conditions of consistency and stability which are crucial for Doris's critical discussion of the empirical adequacy of virtue ethics. Thus I leave this third condition to one side in what follows.

iterated stability in repeated instances of the same trait-relevant circumstances. Consider for instance how a trait such as honesty is understood according to such a globalist conception. Someone with this trait would be expected to behave honestly both in a wide variety of different honesty-relevant eliciting conditions (taking exams, testifying, talking to a spouse, etc.), as well as in repeated instances of the same conditions (i.e., many exams taken over multiple years). Such behavior would be no accident, as what would ground and hence explain why the person acts the way that he or she does in those circumstances is precisely a character trait or disposition to be honest.

Thus ascriptions of character traits to individual agents are supposed to play two central roles on a globalist framework—they are meant to explain consistent and stable manifestations of trait-relevant behavior, and they are supposed to accurately ground predictions of such behavior in the future. But, according to Doris, when we turn to empirical data in experimental social psychology, we find that situationism is the dominant research paradigm. Situationism rejects the first globalist thesis, and is neutral on the truth of the second.⁵ Such a rejection stems from the kinds of experiments alluded to above, experiments which seem to show that behavior is highly influenced not by global traits but rather by a wide variety of situational influences. In particular, very few people seem to exhibit any traits of character which are cross-situationally consistent; when someone is, say, honest in one situation, we find that he or she is often dishonest in all kinds of other situations.

In the philosophical literature on situationism, Harman seems at times to hold that the upshot of these empirical results in social psychology should be that there are no character traits whatsoever (Harman 1999, 2000).⁶ Doris, on the other hand, notes that situationism does not rule out the second thesis of globalism above, and argues that in fact there is evidence that people are remarkably consistent during temporal iterations of the same kind of situation. So he is willing to postulate the existence of very fine-grained “local” character traits, traits which even if they exist nevertheless represent a significant departure from the global traits operative in traditional philosophical theorizing about character (Doris 2002, pp. 23, 25, 64).

So virtue ethics implies globalism, but globalism is incompatible with situationism, and situationism is empirically well-verified; therefore virtue ethics is empirically inadequate. As was noted above, support for this line of reasoning has centered almost entirely on the putative global character trait of compassion. But rather than revisiting the entire range of experiments that Doris cites on compassion

⁵ More positively, situationism is characterized by Doris as a view which is committed to the follow three central claims:

- (a) “Behavioral variation across a population owes more to situational differences than disposition differences among persons...
- (b) Systematic observation problematizes the attribution of robust traits...
- (c) Personality is not often evaluatively integrated” (Doris 2002, pp. 24–25).

⁶ The above has become a popular way of understanding Harman’s view, but to be fair at other times he only seems to be rejecting the existence of what he calls ‘broad-based’ dispositions, i.e., traits of character which meet Doris’ first criterion for being global. Fortunately for our purposes nothing hangs on which interpretation proves to be correct.

and helping behavior, let us turn specifically to the mood effect studies and the support which they are taken to offer for situationism.⁷

The main mood study which Doris cites as evidence against the existence of a global trait of compassion (Doris 1998, p. 504; Doris 2002, p. 30) is the first dime helping experiment performed by Isen and Levin (1972). In the study, 41 adults were observed making phone calls at particular public telephone booths, and things were set up such that a randomly selected half of the unsuspecting subjects would find a dime if they checked the coin return slot. Subjects who were not alone or who did not check the slot were excluded from the study. Once a subject left the phone booth, a confederate started moving “in the same direction as the subject and, while walking slightly ahead and to the side of him or her, dropped a manila folder full of papers in the subject’s path. The dependent measure was whether the subject helped the female confederate pick up the papers” (Isen and Levin 1972, p. 387). And the results? According to Isen and Levin (1972):

	Helped	Did not help
Found dime	14	2
Did not find dime	1	24

This data does indeed seem to provide strong evidence for situationism—a seemingly trivial change in the situation brought about a significant difference in helping behavior.

However, it turns out that this was a problematic study for Doris to choose as other social psychologists failed to replicate the same results. Blevins and Murphy (1974, p. 326) employed closely similar experimental conditions and recorded the following results⁸:

	Helped	Did not help
Found dime	6	9
Did not find dime	15	20

They concluded that there is “no relationship between finding a dime and helping” (Ibid).

In a later study, Levin and Isen (1975, p. 146) varied their phone booth case in the following way. Instead of potentially helping a confederate pick up dropped papers, subjects were given the opportunity to mail a stamped addressed envelope that seemed to have been inadvertently left behind in the phone booth. Thus subjects noticed the letter before they checked the coin return slot.⁹ Here were the results:

⁷ The next three paragraphs are adapted from my 2003, appendix.

⁸ Note that rather than dropped papers in Isen and Levin’s experiment, subjects in this study had the chance to pick up dropped packages.

⁹ The purpose of this variant of the experiment was to test the alternative explanation that, “increased helpfulness could be seen as a reflection of their having been more likely to notice the person in need, rather than as a function of their mood state” (Levin and Isen 1975, p. 142).

	Mailed letter	Left letter
Found dime	10	1
Did not find dime	4	9

But again others had difficulty with replication. Weyant and Clark (1977, p. 109), using five different locations and over four times as many test subjects, recorded the following:

	Mailed letter	Left letter
Found dime	12	42
Did not find dime	15	37

Given these findings, they concluded that, “subjects who found a dime did not mail an apparently lost letter more often than did subjects who did not find a dime” (Weyant and Clark 1977, p. 109).¹⁰

Thus the central mood effect experiment that Doris cited does not by itself warrant the conclusions that he drew from it. However, it does not follow that we should set aside all mood effect studies in general.¹¹ After all, there are literally *hundreds* of other experiments in the social psychology literature which exhibit the

¹⁰ Schellenberg and Blevins (1973) also could not duplicate the results of a different helping experiment in Isen and Levin (1972).

In their 1979 study, Batson et al. varied the dime case in such a way that, upon completing their calls, students at the University of Kansas were presented with the opportunity first to acquire information about the state of Kansas, and then soon afterwards help a female confederate who dropped a large folder of papers. The results were as follows for 40 test subjects:

	Acquired information	Did not acquire
Dime	18	2
No dime	12	8

	Helped	Did not help
Dime	13	7
No dime	6	14

Naturally it would be important to see if the data can be duplicated, especially given the small sample size. But even if it can be, the results of this study are not nearly as dramatic as those obtained by Isen and Levin (1972). After all, 30% of subjects helped and 60% acquired information even without the mood elevation of finding the dime in the coin slot. For more, see Batson et al. (1979, pp. 176–179).

¹¹ To his credit, in a footnote (2002, p. 30, fn. 4) Doris does acknowledge the replication trouble for Isen and Levin’s experiments. Given the wealth of other similar experiments, though, it is not clear why he did not appeal directly to them instead.

same trends as were found in the two studies by Isen and Levin.¹² To take just one example, Baron (1997) studied the effect of pleasant fragrances on helping in shopping malls. More specifically, he varied (i) the presence of odors, (ii) the gender of shoppers, and (iii) the order in which shoppers were first asked to fill out a survey on both their current mood and the air quality in the mall, or instead were first asked to make change for a dollar bill. Pleasant fragrances were those located outside stores like Cinnabon and Mrs. Field's Cookies, whereas clothing stores and the like were chosen as control sites. A subject helped only if he or she stopped and made change for the dollar bill, and only individuals of the same gender as the accomplice were approached. Here were the percentages of people who helped out of 116 shoppers surveyed (Baron 1997, p. 501):

	No fragrance		Fragrance	
	Helping first (%)	Mood first (%)	Helping first (%)	Mood first (%)
Males	22	25	45	61
Females	17	12.5	61	59

Again we have a case where a seemingly insignificant environmental variable has a dramatic influence on helping behavior.¹³

How could this be if what is supposed to explain our behavior is a global character trait like compassion? Manifestations of such a trait should be invariant across variations in fragrance quality and other seemingly trivial situational variables like temperature (Anderson et al. 1995), pleasant weather (Cunningham 1979), noise level (Mathews and Canon 1975), being on a winning team (Berg 1978), imagining taking a vacation to Hawaii (Rosenhan et al. 1981), watching pleasant and unpleasant slides (Donnerstein et al. 1975), and lighting quality (Gifford 1988). But from these and many other studies we know that helping behavior ends up fluctuating dramatically as a result of such factors. Thus we seem to have good grounds for denying that most people regularly manifest the global character trait of compassion.¹⁴ Or so, at least, we should believe given a quick inspection of a few mood effect studies from social psychology. But the literature on mood and helping is vast, and once we examine it more closely, matters turn out to be a great deal more complex. In order to get a foothold on this literature, let us keep the discussion of positive and negative mood separate, and devote a section of this paper to each of them.

¹² For overviews, see Carlson et al. (1988) and Schaller and Cialdini (1990).

¹³ For additional work on the effect of fragrances on helping behavior, see Baron and Thomley (1994).

¹⁴ As Doris (2002) rightly notes, "compassion the character trait is a stable and consistent disposition to perform beneficent actions; failures to behave compassionately when doing so is appropriate and not unduly costly are evidence against attributing the trait" (p. 29).

3 The Influence of Positive Affect on Helping

Social psychologists typically conceptualize the impact of an environmental variable like fragrance on helping in the following way:

- (i) The environmental variable is construed positively and produces positive affect in the subject, other things being equal.
- (ii) Positive affect significantly augments the activation and/or the functioning of a helping mechanism, other things being equal.
- (iii) The augmented helping mechanism in turn elicits relevant forms of helping behavior, other things being equal.

Let us take each of these claims in turn:

3.1 Positive Affect

While “affect” is typically used in the social psychology literature as a synonym both for “feelings” or “moods” on the one hand and for “emotions” on the other, the focus of the experimental work on affect and helping behavior has been primarily on the role of elevated mood. The moods in question are temporary ones, of the kind that we typically experience on a daily basis and often without giving them a second thought. In addition, the moods in the studies of interest here are only of moderate strength, rather than being intensely felt. As Forgas (1995, p. 41) writes, these moods are “low-intensity, diffuse and relatively enduring affective states without a salient antecedent cause and therefore little cognitive content (e.g., feeling good or feeling bad).” Positive emotional states of joy or elation, on the other hand, are not to be included under the heading of “positive affect” as they are comparatively rare in their occurrence and have an intensity that often grabs our attention immediately. Thus for our purposes in the remainder of this paper, we shall follow the relevant social psychology literature and focus mainly on the influence that temporary and moderate positive feelings or moods have on helping.¹⁵

The first claim of this section, then, is that something in the environment which is construed positively by the subject often generates an increased degree of positive affect in that subject.¹⁶ And presumably we did not need social psychology to tell us this; it is a commonplace that what we take to be good things happening to us tend to put us in better moods.

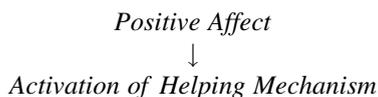
3.2 Positive Affect and Augmentation

In those cases where a positively construed environmental variable leads to increased helping behavior, social psychologists typically attribute this change to the role of positive affect in triggering or augmenting the activity of a relevant helping

¹⁵ For related discussion, see Isen (1987, p. 205), Schaller and Cialdini (1990, p. 266), Forgas (1995, p. 41), and Isen (1999, p. 522).

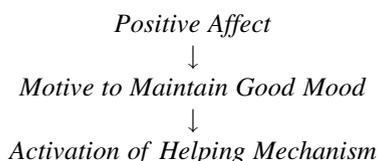
¹⁶ See, e.g., Schaller and Cialdini (1990, p. 271).

mechanism.¹⁷ Thus to use the first of several crude diagrams that will be employed in this paper, the second claim of this section can be represented as follows:



where the arrow is intended to symbolize causal influence. The focus of research on positive affect and helping in the past 30 years has largely taken such a relationship for granted, and has been centered on trying to determine exactly how positive affect has this causal influence. Unfortunately, there has been a great deal of disagreement in the literature as a number of different and sometimes incompatible models have been proposed.¹⁸ Given limitations of space, we shall only examine the two leading models of affect augmentation of helping behavior, namely the mood maintenance hypothesis and the concomitance hypothesis.

According to the first model, positive affect generates or triggers a distinct motive in the subject to maintain the good mood that he or she is experiencing. There might be a variety of ways of trying to maintain this mood elevation, but helping other people is typically perceived as one such means because of the social rewards and gratification that we often experience from doing so. Thus diagrammatically we have the following:



So the starting point of this first model is that positive affect augments helping because helping prolongs the positive affect.

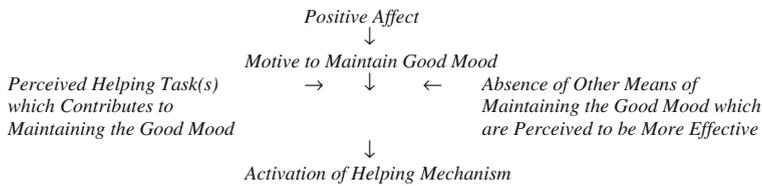
This model has a number of important implications. One is that subjects in good moods should show different degrees of helping behavior when the task is perceived to be pleasant as opposed to painful, depressing, or ungratifying. If their positive affect really does generate a motive to maintain their good mood, then other things being equal subjects should be resistant to helping tasks which are so costly or painful that they will threaten their good mood. Secondly, as we noted helping is only one way whereby a subject might maintain a good mood. But if there are other actions available which by the subject's own lights are also mood conducive but at the same time are much less costly, then in those cases we should *not* expect positive affect to lead to increased helping.¹⁹

These two implications render our schematic representation of the mood maintenance model more complex:

¹⁷ For representative examples from the literature, see Isen (1987), Carlson et al. (1988), and Schaller and Cialdini (1990).

¹⁸ For a helpful overview, see Carlson et al. (1988).

¹⁹ For related remarks, see Manucia et al. (1984), Carlson et al. (1988), Salovey et al. (1991), and Wegener and Petty (1994).



Similarly, if the mood maintenance model is correct, then statement (ii) can be revised as follows:

- (ii*) Positive affect significantly augments the activation and/or the functioning of a helping mechanism, other things being equal, provided that the subject does not take there to be other, more effective means of maintaining the good mood, and provided that the perceived helping task(s) itself does not threaten the subject's good mood.

The above, then, captures the basic idea behind the mood maintenance model.

It is important to note, however, that there is a respect in which the diagram above is liable to be misleading. For strictly speaking, it need not follow from this model that in all cases of positive affect and helping behavior, the person helps for the *sole* or even the *dominant* motive of maintaining the good mood. Rather, all that need follow is that such a motive is making *some* contribution to the initial and continued performance of the behavior, perhaps in conjunction with other motives unrelated to mood maintenance. Such a partial motivational contribution may be sufficient to account for the fact that happy subjects tend to help more than controls. Beyond this, though, it will be difficult to give a precise characterization of the contribution such a motive makes, as its contribution will likely vary by individual, situation, and time. Thus at some times the motive to maintain a good mood might be making a significant but weaker motivational contribution than other helping motives, while at other times it may be so strong that it blocks those other motives to help when the target of the helping behavior is thought to be negative or potentially contributory towards a bad mood.²⁰

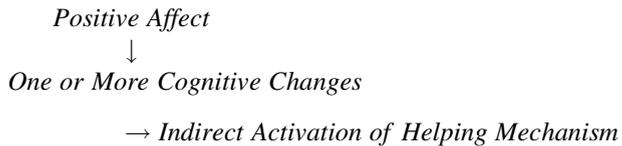
Several studies have been used as support for the mood maintenance model. Thus Isen and Simmonds (1978) performed a variant of the dime-helping experiment but this time rather than helping pick up papers, subjects were asked to read a series of statements which were described to the subject as being designed to put people in a good or a bad mood. The results were that among subjects who found a dime, the ones reading positively characterized statements would spend a longer time doing so than would those reading statements which allegedly put people in a negative mood. Subjects who did not find a dime, on the other hand, showed no difference in their willingness to read either set of statements. The natural inference to make from these results is that subjects who

²⁰ Similarly, Isen notes that in certain cases it also might turn out that, "the motive to help another might outweigh one's desire to maintain one's own pleasant feelings if the other's need were very great or somehow more 'important'" (Isen 1987, p. 208). For helpful discussion of these issues, see Isen (1987).

were put in a good mood by the dime read few negatively characterized statements because doing so threatened their good mood.²¹

The other leading model of the relationship between positive affect and helping is the concomitance model. As background to this model, it is important to appreciate the significant role that positive affect has to play in our psychological lives quite apart from its bearing on helping. Thus studies have shown that positive affect can influence all sorts of cognitive processing—among other things, it can lead to increased information acquisition (Batson et al. 1979), enhanced task performance (Baron and Thomley 1994), higher self-reward (Mischel et al. 1968), increased cooperativeness (Batson et al. 1979), great optimism about the future (Masters and Furman 1976), better recall of positive events in memory (Isen et al. 1978), and higher efficiency in some problem solving tasks (Isen and Means 1983).

The concomitance model makes use of these observations and holds that increased helping is merely a causal byproduct of one or more of these cognitive changes brought about by positive affect. Thus it could be that, for example, positive affect increases optimism about the future which in turn indirectly leads to more generosity in the present (Masters and Furman 1976), or that it triggers memories of past helping which indirectly dispose the person to help more now (Isen et al. 1978). The central idea, however, is the following:



Whereas helping is at least in part a direct means to the satisfaction of a motive to maintain a positive mood according to the mood maintenance hypothesis, helping is merely a causal byproduct of positive affect according to the concomitance model. Thus the latter view is committed to denying that maintaining mood level is the means by which positive affect augments helping.

The concomitance model itself is not so much a detailed proposal about the relationship between positive affect and helping as it is a methodological approach to understanding this relationship, an approach which can then be fleshed out using any of a number of distinct substantive proposals such as the two noted in the previous paragraph.²² Nonetheless, by itself the concomitance model has several important implications of its own. One is that helping behavior augmented by positive affect should be neutral on the perceived attractions of the helping target. Since helping is just a causal byproduct, it would seem to follow that as far as the subject's positive mood is concerned helping should not vary depending on the subject's estimates of the costs associated with helping. Secondly and for the same reason, we should not expect to see subjects bypassing opportunities to help when other less costly opportunities are available to maintain a good mood. Thus if the concomitance model is correct, then statement (ii) can be revised as follows:

²¹ For related studies, see Forest et al. (1979) and Harada (1983). See also the discussion in Isen (1987, pp. 207–209), Carlson et al. (1988), Salovey et al. (1991), and Wegener and Petty (1994).

²² For a similar observation, see Carlson et al. (1988, p. 215).

- (ii**) Positive affect significantly augments the activation and/or the functioning of a helping mechanism, other things being equal, irrespective of whether the subject takes there to be other, more effective means of maintaining the good mood, and irrespective of whether the perceived helping task(s) itself threatens the subject's good mood.²³

Statements (ii*) and (ii**) thus seem to provide clearly incompatible approaches to theorizing about positive affect and helping.

There is a wealth of studies which allegedly support the concomitance model as well. For example, in Weyant's well-known 1978 experiment some subjects had their affect levels raised by being made to believe that they had performed well on a fake anagram test. After learning the results of the test, they were presented with an opportunity to donate their time to charity work. Of the 252 subjects, random assignments were made as to which of them would be presented with one of the following opportunities:

- American Cancer Society (high benefits) and Door-to-Door Work (high costs)
- American Cancer Society (high benefits) and Desk Work (low costs)
- Little League Baseball (low benefits) and Door-to-Door Work (high costs)
- Little League Baseball (low benefits) and Desk Work (low costs)

The percentage of subjects who volunteered came out as follows (Weyant 1978, p. 1173):

	Positive affect (%)	Controls (%)
High benefits/high costs	57	33
High benefits/low costs	62	33
Low benefits/high costs	52	29
Low benefits/low costs	62	33

Thus in light of these results it seems that positive affect augmented helping regardless of the perceived costs and benefits, thereby supporting one of the implications of the concomitance model.²⁴

Manucia, Baumann, and Cialdini's much debated 1984 study offers what is perhaps even more compelling support for the concomitance model. Mood was

²³ For related discussion, see Manucia et al. (1984), Isen (1987), and Carlson et al. (1988).

²⁴ Note that there may be a way to reconcile Weyant's results with the seemingly incompatible experimental results obtained by Isen and Simmonds in their dime-helping experiment. For one way of interpreting experiments such as Weyant's is as involving the stimulation of the agent's perceived moral obligations and the generation by those moral obligations of motivation to help. The motivation from this separate augmentation process in turn might have been strong enough to explain why subjects volunteered for the unpleasant options even though no motivation was coming from the mood maintenance system. On the other hand, in Isen and Simmonds (1978) there was no clear appeal being made to the subject's sense of moral duty or obligation when he or she was asked to read a list of mood statements. The same is true of many other experiments offered in support of the mood maintenance hypothesis. For a similar proposal, see Carlson et al. (1988, p. 224).

varied by asking subjects to recall and reminisce about past happy 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 donate their time to make calls for a local nonprofit blood organization. If the mood maintenance hypothesis were correct, then presumably subjects whose mood states were “frozen” would help less than subjects whose mood states were more liable, since helping would not be needed as a means in order to help maintain their moods given the freezing effect of the drug. However, it turned out that the amount of help volunteered was the same for happy subjects with both frozen and liable moods. And this is exactly what the concomitance model would have predicted.²⁵

Trying to adjudicate the debate between advocates of the mood maintenance and concomitance hypotheses would require more space than is available here. Indeed, I am convinced that far more experimental work needs to be done in the first place, both to replicate existing studies and to more carefully test these leading models, before we are in a position to have sufficient empirical evidence with which to make such an adjudication. By way of conclusion, let me again stress that neither of these models purports to tell the whole story about what motivates people in good moods to help. As we noted above, the motive that results from positive affect according to the mood maintenance hypothesis might combine with other motives to help such as those stemming from the person’s moral obligations, or might even be outweighed by opposing motives not to help. Similarly in the case of the concomitance model, positive affect may have as one of its byproducts the strengthening of an already existing helping motive or the production of a weak motive that combines with others to lead to helping behavior.²⁶

3.3 Helping Mechanisms and Helping Behavior

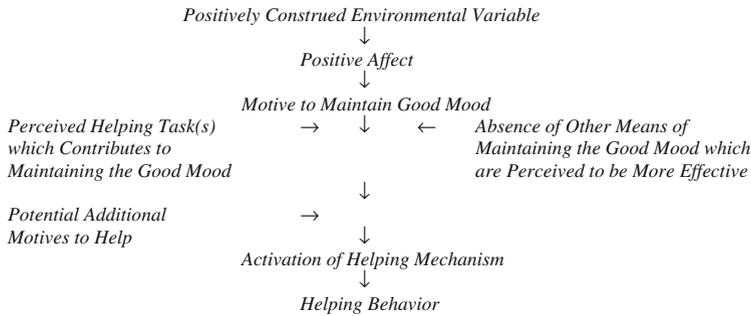
With affect having motivationally augmented the helping mechanisms, those mechanisms in turn, whatever they might be, are far more likely to causally issue in the relevant helping behavior. Or rather we should say that they are more likely to do so while other things are held equal. Clearly if the mechanism is malfunctioning or if the person is temporarily incapacitated, then we should not expect to see him or her come to the aid of others in need.

In sum, then, by combining our statements (i), (ii), and (iii) together with the mood maintenance and concomitance hypotheses, and holding other things equal, we get the following two diagrams for cases of helping behavior in which positive affect has a role to play in bringing about that behavior:

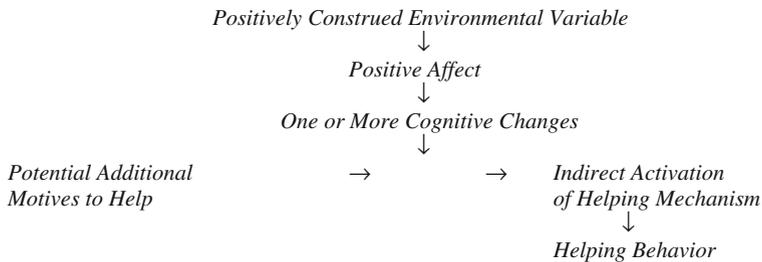
²⁵ See Manucia et al. (1984). For a response on behalf of the mood maintenance hypothesis, see Wegener and Petty (1994). And for related studies and general discussion of the concomitance model, see Cialdini et al. (1982), Shaffer and Graziano (1983), Manucia et al. (1984), Carlson et al. (1988), Cunningham et al. (1990) Schaller and Cialdini (1990); Wegener and Petty (1994), and Isen (1999).

²⁶ For related discussion, see Isen (1987, p. 208).

Mood Maintenance Model



Concomitance Model



No doubt these diagrams oversimplify each of the two views, but they provide enough detail for our purposes in this paper.

4 The Influence of Negative Affect on Helping

In the previous section we were careful to only focus on the impact of *positive* affect on helping. What role do negative feelings or moods have to play? Initially we might be tempted by symmetry considerations into thinking that just as positive affect augments helping, so negative affect decreases helping as compared to control subjects. In fact, however, what we often find in the social psychology literature on negative affect are claims which directly parallel those we saw in the previous section:

- (a) An environmental variable is construed negatively and produces negative affect in the subject, other things being equal.
- (b) Negative affect significantly augments the activation and/or the functioning of a helping mechanism, other things being equal.
- (c) The augmented helping mechanism in turn elicits relevant forms of helping behavior, other things being equal.

Again let us take each of these claims in turn:

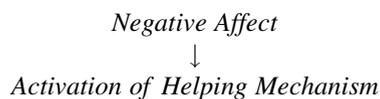
4.1 Negative Affect

As with positive affect, the focus here is on negative moods and feelings rather than on negative emotions. More specifically, “negative affect” will refer to feelings of sadness that are temporary in duration and moderate in strength. As such, negative affect does not include more serious psychological conditions like clinical depression, as well as intense negative emotions such as fear, anger, or guilt.²⁷ This is important since each of these other states also has its own distinct bearing on helping behavior. Anger, for example, has been shown to not stimulate helping, whereas guilt reliably does.²⁸

The first claim above concerning negative affect should be intuitively compelling—subjects confronted with what they take to be negative environmental variables are likely to experience negative affective states.²⁹ In the experimental literature, the kinds of manipulations designed to produce negative affect have included recalling a sad event, hearing loud noises, and being informed of a poor performance on a test.

4.2 Negative Affect and Augmentation

In contrast to what might have been expected on intuitive grounds, there is strong empirical evidence for the thesis that increased negative affect often significantly augments helping behavior in certain conditions. Thus, for example, Weyant (1978) also used his fake anagram study to induce negative affect in other test subjects, and subsequently 71% volunteered to help in the high benefit, low cost scenario as opposed to only 33% of control subjects.³⁰ Thus let us start with this initial diagram:



where again the arrow represents causal influence.

As with positive affect, the main focus in the literature has been on how best to model the influence that negative affect has on helping. In this case, a concomitance model has seemed to researchers to be much less promising. For note that negative moods can impair attention and thinking (Ellis and Ashbrook 1988), fail to enhance

²⁷ See Manucia et al. (1984, p. 357, fn. 1), Cialdini et al. (1987, p. 750), Cialdini and Fultz (1990, p. 211), and Schaller and Cialdini (1990, p. 266).

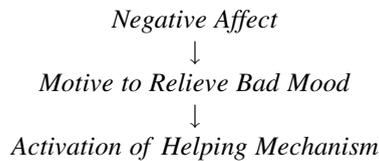
²⁸ For anger, see Cialdini et al. (1981). For guilt, see Carlsmith and Gross (1969) and Regan (1971).

²⁹ See, e.g., Schaller and Cialdini (1990, p. 271).

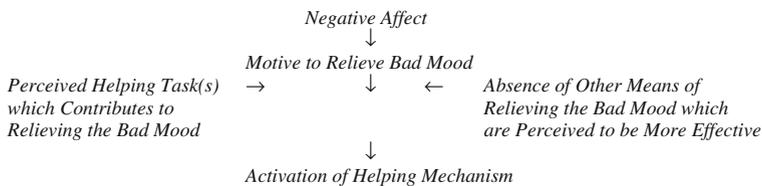
³⁰ For other results which indicate a relationship between negative affect and helping, see Cialdini and Kenrick (1976), Cialdini et al. (1982), Manucia et al. (1984), Cialdini et al. (1987), and Cialdini and Fultz (1990).

the retrieval of negative events in memory (Nasby and Yando 1982), diminish feelings of control (Alloy and Abramson 1979), increase time spent on cost/benefit analysis and examination of the situation (Schwarz 1990), and draw focus away from the environment and onto the self (Rogers et al. 1982). In light of these cognitive influences, it is far from clear why motivation to help others would issue forth as a casual byproduct.

Instead, the dominant model for understanding how negative affect augments helping behavior has been a mood management hypothesis.³¹ On this view, negative affect generates a motive to relieve the bad mood and return the person to an equilibrium condition. A number of means might be available for elevating mood, and one of them will often be helping others because of the social rewards and gratification associated with such behavior. Thus a preliminary diagram of the mood management hypothesis would look something like this:



Not surprisingly, this view has implications which parallel those of the mood maintenance hypothesis for positive affect. One such implication is that other things being equal, subjects experiencing negative affect will not engage in helping behavior when the benefits for themselves of doing so are not perceived to outweigh the costs. In other words, if the costs associated with an action are taken to be greater than or roughly equal to the benefits, then that action will be perceived to make no contribution to negative mood elimination and hence not be performed. A second implication is that other things being equal, if there are other actions available 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.³²

In light of these implications, we can present a more refined version of the mood management hypothesis as follows:

³¹ 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), Batson et al. (1989), Schaller and Cialdini (1990), and Taylor (1991). For criticism of the mood management model, see Carlson and Miller (1987) and Miller and Carlson (1990). For two alternative models, see Carlson and Miller (1987, pp. 92–93), and Salovey et al. (1991, pp. 222–223).

³² For related remarks, see Cialdini et al. (1973), Benson (1978), Cunningham et al. (1980), Manucia et al. (1984); Carlson and Miller (1987), and Salovey et al. (1991).

Similarly, if this view is correct, then statement (b) can be revised to read:

- (b*) Negative affect significantly augments the activation and/or the functioning of a helping mechanism, other things being equal, provided that the subject does not take there to be other, more effective means of relieving the bad mood, and provided that the perceived helping task(s) itself is thought to be conducive to relieving the subject's bad mood.

The above, then, captures the basic idea behind the mood management model.

Weyant's study produced results which are exactly in line with this model. Thus

	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

the breakdown for the proportion of subjects who volunteered their time was as follows (Weyant 1978, p. 1173).

As expected, it was only in the high benefit/low cost scenario that negatively affected subjects exhibited a greater degree of helping behavior than controls.

Similarly, in their 1984 study Manucia, Baumann, and Cialdini also examined the impact of their "freezing drug" on negatively affected subjects. First a different group of subjects was required to recall and reminisce about sad experiences. They were then given the placebo and again only half of them were told about the drug's ability to freeze mood. Finally as they left the experiment, subjects were presented with the opportunity to donate time to make calls for the blood organization. The results? Unlike in the case of positive affect, "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" (Manucia et al. 1984, p. 362). And this is precisely what the mood management hypothesis would have predicted.

Such a model also helps to nicely explain an important age difference in the experimental results. 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.³³ 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

³³ 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 et al. (1979).

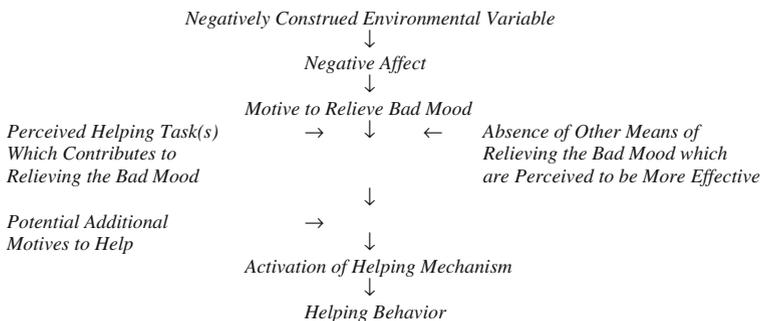
hand, have typically been educated in the social rewards associated with helping, and so understand, even if inchoately, that negative affect can be relieved by helping. If this explanation of the difference in helping behavior exhibited by children and adults in bad moods is correct, then one would 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 what we do in fact find.³⁴

It is perhaps worthwhile to note that no comparable age difference has been detected in the case of positive affect—both young children and adults alike exhibit increased helping behavior.³⁵ Such a result could be construed as additional empirical support for the concomitance model since the social rewards associated with helping might not be playing a role if young children who do not appreciate such rewards are helping to the same extent as adults when in a good mood.

Finally, by way of conclusion it is important to keep in mind the same cautionary note that was voiced at the end of the last section. 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.

4.3 Helping Mechanisms and Helping Behavior

The third claim of this section is intended to be straightforward—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. We need to keep in mind that this claim assumes, though, that other things are equal; helping behavior in these circumstances will not result if there are malfunctions in the helping mechanism or certain external obstacles in the world.



³⁴ For further discussion, see Moore et al. (1973), Rosenhan et al. (1974), Cialdini et al. (1973), Cialdini and Kenrick (1976), and Manucia et al. (1984).

³⁵ See, e.g., Moore et al. (1973), Rosenhan et al. (1974), and Barden et al. (1981).

In sum, then, by combining our statements (a), (b), and (c) together with the mood management hypothesis, and holding other things equal, we get the following diagram for cases of helping behavior in which negative affect has a role to play in bringing about that behavior:

Finally, by way of summarizing the last two sections, we have seen that the following three models represent what at present are the most promising ways of understanding the relationship between affect and helping:

Positive Affect

Mood Maintenance Model

Concomitance Model

Negative Affect

Mood Management Model

Thus it appears that we are psychologically organized to handle positive and negative affect rather differently, and hence, as social psychologists have often noted, any model which tries to offer one unified story about both kinds of affect and their bearing on helping will be overly simplistic. This is true even if the mood maintenance and mood management models end up being correct. For sustaining a positive mood is a rather different psychological process than one aimed at eliminating a negative mood altogether.³⁶

5 Preliminary Implications for Virtue Ethics

With this brief sketch in mind of recent work in social psychology on affect and helping, what should we conclude about the viability of virtue ethics and more specifically about the existence of global character traits pertaining to helping behavior? Overall the results seem decidedly mixed, and in this section I note several apparent implications. The most significant implication, however, will be reserved for the final section of this paper.

Most People Do Not Exhibit Compassion. Recall that a global character trait such as compassion enables the person who possesses it to exhibit cross-situationally consistent trait-relevant behavior. And so if most people have this trait we would expect to find that they are often compassionate in a wide variety of situations. But this is not what we in fact find. Many people will change a dollar bill or volunteer for the American Cancer Society when they are experiencing elevated levels of either positive or negative affect, but absent the seemingly trivial events which stimulated the affect, compassionate behavior drops off dramatically. Note as well that the helping tasks in question are often not particularly strenuous ones like making sizable donations to charity or forgoing a lucrative career to care for sick relatives. In such cases we might expect that even moderately compassionate people

³⁶ For similar remarks, see Schaller and Cialdini (1990).

would not always rise to the challenge. Instead the variability in compassionate behavior that we find in the social psychology literature is manifested with respect to such relatively painless acts as making change or pledging an hour of time. Nor does it seem that the subjects in question are refraining from exhibiting compassion because helping in these situations conflicts with one or more *additional* global traits in their characters. For what other character traits would account for the significant difference that a pleasant fragrance or soft music makes?

These considerations are especially forceful when we focus on the helping experiments that involve negative effect. As we have seen, helping behavior among adults seems to be directly proportional to perceived costs and benefits as very few people in a moderately bad mood help when the benefits for themselves of doing so do not outweigh the costs. Yet such behavior is simply incompatible with genuine compassion. A compassionate person helps in most cases even if the perceived benefits and costs for herself cancel each other out.

In response, it might be objected that the social psychological studies in question cannot allow us to draw the above conclusions since the helping actions they involved did not concern people in serious need, and hence such opportunities to help may have simply escaped the notice of a compassionate person who is not experiencing mood elevation.³⁷ However, I find this objection to be less than compelling. First, the helping tasks were ones for which there were no other helping opportunities in the immediate environment which might have been thought to be more significant than the experimental helping opportunity. Rather, the alternative to performing the helping task was simply to ignore a person's dropped book, for example, or to not assist a person in looking for lost contact lenses. Secondly, it is hard to accept the claim that the helping opportunities in the relevant experiments were not significant. In addition to the ones already mentioned throughout this paper, other helping tasks used in affect studies included donating money to help South American children (Cunningham et al. 1980), and volunteering to donate blood (O'Malley and Andrews 1983). It seems difficult to explain the failure of subjects to perform *these* actions without the benefit of mood elevation by asserting that the actions fall outside the scope of compassionate concern.

Many Affectively Elevated People Do Not Have Entirely Compassionate Motives. According to traditional forms of Aristotelian virtue ethics, virtuous agents will not only perform right actions but also do them for the right motivating reasons. Thus someone who helps another might be doing what he ought to do, but if he does it either solely or even in large part because of considerations such as social recognition or monetary reward, he would not be exhibiting the virtue of compassion.

While we noted that there is much debate in the social psychology literature as to the best story about positive affect and helping, a mood management story for negative affect is widely accepted. Thus even if it is largely unconscious or

³⁷ I have been presented with this objection on several occasions, but it was stated perhaps most forcefully by James Taylor in written comments on an earlier version of this paper.

inchoate, the pursuit of rewards for the agent will be playing a significant motivational role for many individuals in bad moods, or at least that is what seems necessary to account for the difference in helping behavior exhibited by negatively affected subjects as compared to control subjects in high cost/low reward situations.³⁸ And if the mood maintenance story ends up being empirically verified in the case of positive affect, then we can attribute the same motivational work to the pursuit of rewards there as well. But such motivation, even if it only constitutes one out of the several motives that actually issue in action, is presumably not compatible with the genuine possession of a global character trait like compassion, or at least not in the way that that trait has been traditionally understood. Helping behavior which stems from such motivation would merely be treated as a means to regulating the helper's mood level, rather than being performed solely to promote the good of someone in need.

Thus the upshot of these first two implications is decidedly negative for virtue ethics. Many people do not exhibit helping behavior when we would expect them to do so if they were genuinely compassionate, and even when they do exhibit such behavior, we have good reason to be skeptical that their motivation is purely altruistic.

Some People Might Be Genuinely Compassionate. Our third implication, however, is friendlier towards virtue ethics. For we can note that the psychological data on affect does not rule out the possibility that some people, albeit perhaps only a few, actually do possess the global character trait of compassion. Roughly 23% of men and 15% of women helped in Baron's mall study without stimulus from a pleasant fragrance, and 29% of controls still volunteered their time even in the high cost/low benefit scenario of Weyant's experiment. Furthermore, even if, when their mood is elevated, such subjects do experience extra motivation to help from a motive to maintain or relieve their mood, such extra motivation might simply end up overdetermining their helping behavior since we already know that they help others in these situations even without this extra contribution.

If at least some of these individuals really were compassionate, then the fact that there were only a few of them need serve as no embarrassment for virtue ethics. After all, it is no part of the virtue ethical tradition, or for that matter of any ethical tradition which appeals to global character traits, that we should expect there to be widespread global trait possession. Emphasis in the virtue ethical tradition in particular has been placed on how the life of progression to full virtue is one of continuous struggle in overcoming character defects and external obstacles. Thus in Plato's *Republic*, virtue emerges through participation in a long and demanding educational process, while for Aristotle virtues are character traits that must be habituated in children and positively reinforced in adults over extended periods of time.³⁹

³⁸ One of the main alternative models to the mood management view has the same implication as well. The so-called objective self-awareness model also implies that helping occurs to alleviate negative affect. For more, see Carlson and Miller (1987, p. 93).

³⁹ See in particular Aristotle (1985) 1099b29–1099b32, 1103b16–1103b31, 1152a30–1152a34, 1179b25–1179b29, 1180a1–1180a5, 15–19 and Burnyeat (1980). These points are developed in greater detail in my 2003.

Thus the experimental results at issue in this paper do not preclude the instantiation of genuine compassion in some of the test subjects. And even Doris himself concedes that the social psychology literature is compatible with the claim that “some individuals may quite consistently exhibit compassion” (Doris 2002, p. 65).⁴⁰

No Support for Local Character Traits. To help the virtue ethical position a little more, we can examine what bearing the literature on affect and helping has for the existence of local character traits. Recall that as an alternative to globalism about character, Doris proposed a view according to which there are a number of fine-grained local traits which have iterative stability but not cross-situational consistency. Such traits are situation particular, and while Doris does not give any rigorous conditions for individuating situations, he does state that he intends them to be differentiated “in terms of environmental features characterizable independently of individual psychological particularities” (Doris 2002, p. 76).

The experimental results we have examined do not seem to provide any support for the existence of local helping traits. For 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 affect might help pick up dropped papers but not volunteer to work for a charity organization, while a significant number of those experiencing no raised levels of affect might make change for a dollar but not make a donation. Yet as we have seen, this is not in fact the way that the behavioral patterns have turned out—the empirical data suggests that a significant number of people with raised levels of positive affect would help in a wide variety of circumstances, while many of those without such raised levels would not. So there seems to be more structure at work than a fragmentation model of character would lead us to believe.⁴¹

Admittedly, these claims must be made with a great deal of hesitancy. For the proper way to evaluate them is to perform detailed longitudinal studies which involve observing one person at a time as that person is confronted with a variety of situations. If we find that such a person routinely helps in a number of different situations when in a positive mood, but often does not help in these situations when not experiencing mood elevation, then that would serve as excellent empirical support for the claims above.

Unfortunately, because of the financial and logistical difficulties associated with carrying out such experiments, no such empirical evidence is available at the present

⁴⁰ Similarly, he notes that “situationism does not preclude the existence of a few saints, just as it does not preclude the existence of a few monsters” (Doris 2002, p. 60).

⁴¹ Doris might respond that given the similarities between the situations most of us end up confronting, situational forces have habituated us into having roughly the same set of local traits associated with helping. Admittedly such a response would account for the results, but it also seems rather difficult to believe. For is it really plausible to think that many of us have, through a process of gradual habituation, acquired separate traits for picking up dropped papers, making change, donating blood, and volunteering for charity work? After all, it is not even clear that many people have been exposed to even a few, much less a significant number of repeated instances of these situation types so that they could have inculcated the relevant local character trait through habituation. Thus it seems that we would be left with a mystery as to how we have come to acquire such discrete and fine-grained helping traits in the first place.

time, or at least not as far as I am aware. And this simply echoes a similar claim made by Doris when he laments the unavailability of the longitudinal data which would be most relevant for evaluating the existence of global character traits like compassion or honesty (Doris 2002, p. 38). So at best perhaps what we should conclude is that the studies on affect and helping do not offer any support for the existence of local helping traits, but at the same time they do not definitively rule them out either.

6 Global Helping Traits

The final and perhaps most important implication to draw from our examination of the social psychology literature on affect and helping is that the empirical results are indeed compatible with the widespread existence for one or more *global* character traits associated with helping. On the other hand, it will turn out that such a result is of little consolation to virtue ethicists since if they do exist, such traits are rather different from how compassion has traditionally been construed. So in order to prevent them from being conflated with compassion, let us call these traits “global helping traits” or GHTs.

GHTs are dispositions to help which are highly sensitive to certain psychological inputs. Given the very modest levels of helping behavior exhibited by control subjects in social psychology experiments, we have good reason for thinking that in ordinary conditions GHTs do not play a robust causal role in our psychological lives. But once activated in one of a variety of ways, global helping traits can generate strong motivational pressure to help. The form of activation that we have focused on in this paper has concerned affect levels. But the social psychology literature also demonstrates that helping is highly sensitive to other psychological factors such as guilt (Regan 1971), embarrassment (Apsler 1975), and empathy (Toi and Batson 1982). A complete discussion of GHTs would thus have to examine studies in these other areas as well, but for now we shall restrict our attention to the role of affect in activating GHTs.⁴²

If we assume that most people possess such global helping traits, we can predict patterns of cross-situational consistency and iterated stability. When it comes to mood states, for example, we can expect that, other things being equal, many people with elevated levels of positive affect will be such that they help others in situations ranging from picking up dropped papers to volunteering time for charity organizations. On the other hand, we can expect that, other things being equal, many people without elevated levels of affect will be such that they do not exhibit these and other forms of helping behavior.

More precisely, we can formulate conditionals which give empirical predictions for helping behavior in order to test whether subjects have such global helping traits. Since as Doris himself notes, “sporadic failures of trait-relevant behavior probably should not be taken to disconfirm attributions” (Doris 2002, p. 19), we can build

⁴² I develop the account of GHTs in much more detail in my 2009a, b.

probabilistic qualifiers into the consequents of the conditionals. Thus for positive affect, 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 eliciting conditions.⁴³

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 and which we have said earlier are not at issue in discussions of mood effect studies and the empirical adequacy of virtue ethics.⁴⁴

Turning to non-elevated levels of affect, we can state the following prediction:

- (b) If an adult possesses a GHT and is experiencing no elevation of affect, that person will probably not engage in helping-relevant behavior in moderate helping-relevant eliciting conditions.

For negative affect it is not surprising that things are a bit more complicated:

- (c) 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;
 - (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 eliciting conditions.

- (d) If an adult possesses a GHT and:
- (i) Is experiencing intermediate levels of increased negative affect;
 - (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 eliciting conditions.

- (e) 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 be roughly *comparable* to the perceived costs to himself;

⁴³ Here I implicitly assume the truth of the concomitance model of positive affect augmentation. If on the other hand the mood maintenance hypothesis is true, then we would have to also build the following condition into the antecedent—“...and the person takes the benefits associated with helping to outweigh the costs...”.

⁴⁴ As Doris agrees (2002, p. 49).

that person will probably *not* engage in helping-relevant behavior in moderate helping-relevant eliciting conditions.

- (f) If a *child* possesses a GHT and is experiencing intermediate levels of increased negative affect, that person will probably *not* engage in helping-relevant behavior in moderate helping-relevant eliciting conditions.

Finally, when it comes to stability over iterations of the same situation type, one example of such a conditional might be:

- (g) If an adult possesses a GHT and:
- (i) Is experiencing intermediate levels of increased negative affect;
 - (ii) Takes the benefits of helping to outweigh the perceived costs in a particular set of moderate helping-relevant eliciting-conditions;
 - (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 both in that situation and in future iterations of it.

Naturally it is assumed both here and in the other predictions 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.

By way of summary, then, if a helping trait is to count as a *global* helping trait, then it has to exhibit some form of cross-situational consistency and iterated stability. But once we are careful to note the important role that affect levels play in influencing the causal efficacy of such GHTs, we can see that the empirical evidence from social psychology as it stands now is compatible with the existence of these global traits.

In order to be able to reliably test the extent to which people actually possess GHTs, if they do so at all, we would need to perform experiments which track various individuals as they find themselves in both similar and different help-eliciting circumstances. Yet as we noted in the previous section, such longitudinal studies are not available at the present time. On the other hand, with over 30 years of work and the results of hundreds of helping experiments in place, many social psychologists today make predictions about the results of their future experiments which exhibit a commitment to conditionals such as (a) through (g), conditionals which presumably would have to be grounded in relatively stable helping structures. Similarly, when we turn to merely hypothetical experiments, social psychologists who are versed in the extant literature would use conditionals like these in order to derive predictions about helping behavior. To take a simple example, if a proposed study were to examine the effects of free food samples, friendly workers, or cash prizes on the helping behavior of customers in supermarkets, we would expect to find that such behavior is exhibited at levels which are statistically higher than those displayed by controls.

Thus I want to suggest that we have good reason to *not* take the social psychology literature to rule out the existence of global traits pertaining to helping. Assuming that this is true, should this result be welcomed news for virtue ethicists? Unfortunately, even if such global helping traits do exist, they are a far cry from genuine compassion as that trait has been traditionally conceived. For such traits are highly sensitive to mood level, among a number of other psychological factors, and so other things being equal, they are not typically activated unless a person is in either a good mood or else is in a bad mood where helping is thought to be able to relieve that mood. But this is not how the character trait of compassion is supposed to function. Someone who is compassionate exhibits helping behavior which does fluctuate significantly with his or her mood and with the rewards that can be expected from helping. In particular, such a person routinely helps even when no mood elevation is occurring in the first place.⁴⁵

7 Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to summarize some of the central experimental results on helping behavior in order to evaluate the empirical adequacy of the global character trait of compassion. As we have seen, the news for any ethical theory which is committed to the instantiation of compassion by human beings is decidedly mixed; while one or more global traits might still be at work in helping behavior and while some people may actually be genuinely compassionate, most people who have been observed in psychological experiments are not.

Where should the virtue ethicist in particular go from here? By way of conclusion, let me very briefly suggest two interrelated lines of further work which might be promising. The goal of each of them is to take whatever psychological structures that most people typically instantiate, and investigate ways in which those structures can be transformed through a process of gradual habituation and refinement into something that resembles genuine compassion as traditionally conceived.

The first line of work would examine ways of moderating the connection between affect and rewards in the case of negative and perhaps positive affect as well. So long as elevated levels of affect make some motivational contribution to helping behavior that involves treating the behavior as purely instrumental and self-interested, genuine compassion will be very difficult to realize in those cases. Thus the virtue ethicist should investigate whether there are any psychologically viable ways whereby elevated mood can be divorced from the pursuit of egoistic rewards. Perhaps one promising strategy would be to examine whether subjects in a positive or negative mood who feel as though they are under a moral obligation to help others will be motivated to do so independently of the perceived benefits for themselves of helping.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ For further development of the GHT model and discussion of how such traits would be distinct from traditional virtues, see my 2009a, b.

⁴⁶ For related discussion, see footnote 23.

The second and closely related line of work would examine *other* ways of augmenting helping behavior besides raising affect levels. As we have said and in contrast to what seems to be empirically true of most people, a genuinely compassionate person exhibits helping behavior which is invariant over at least moderate fluctuations of affect level. Here one intriguing strategy is to consider the role of empathy as a powerful source of motivation to help. Batson and his colleagues have for over twenty years been engaged in a sustained research project which has repeatedly shown that subjects who empathize with those in need are far more likely to help regardless of what mood they happen to be in.⁴⁷ Furthermore, in response to several critics,⁴⁸ Batson has produced a number of studies which indicate that the motivation to help that results from empathy is genuinely altruistic motivation of a kind that is consistent with compassion.⁴⁹ In particular, it is motivation which seems to involve neither mood maintenance nor mood management. Thus if people were habituated to empathize more with others and have that empathy activate the relevant helping mechanisms, they might routinely exhibit behavior which rightly deserves to be called compassionate.⁵⁰

Of course the above are just initial positive suggestions for virtue ethicists. Regardless of whatever plausibility they might ultimately have, something clearly needs to be done in order for most of us to be able to bridge the gap between our actual selves and the compassionate people we might hope to become.

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⁴⁷ See, e.g., Toi and Batson (1982), Batson (1991, 2002).

⁴⁸ See especially Cialdini et al. (1987) and Cialdini et al. (1997).

⁴⁹ See especially Batson et al. (1989).

⁵⁰ For detailed discussion of work in social psychology on empathy and helping as well as the relationship of that work to the global helping trait model, see my 2009a.

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