Trait Attribution Error

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Section 3: Paper 6

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Sometimes we make the choice to rely upon the trait of being on time over making the choice to rely upon the trait of driving safely. So Gerry can run the red light to respect Stephanie's time, while striking Paul's car and disrespecting his property and life in the process. It appears that there are single situations with two or more morally salient features where we can apply different and ordinarily positive traits to our moral choices and by selecting the wrong moral choice, we can be seen to behave abominably. Notice that when utilizing the trait attribution error as our excuse, we can still see ourselves as positive moral agents or "good persons" in the situation where we have behaved abominably. The trait attribution error takes place when we defend failing to perform the correct moral action with the motive of why we applied a specific positive trait to the wrong moral choice. So the Nazi soldier gets to remain "a good moral person" in his own eyes – because he applied the normally positive trait of following a superior's orders – while at the same time performing horrific moral actions. In this paper I want to explain and explore aspects of the benefits of the phenomenon I call "trait attribution error," with the two primary candidates being how it helps us both to avoid blame for improper moral acts and to dodge our negative psychology. The trait attribution error creates a cycle of error, preventing us from becoming virtuous moral agents by enabling us to make the same mistakes.

In John Doris' book, *Lack of Character,* he says that traits like shyness or diligence (Doris, 2008: 15) are supposed to make us consistent to the point that we are predictable. Virtue ethicists believe that "virtues are supposed to be robust traits; if a person has a robust trait, they can be confidently expected to display trait-relevant behavior across a wide variety of trait-relevant situations, even where some or all of these situations are not optimally conducive to such behavior" (Doris, 2008: 18). The problem is, as cases like the Milgram experiment demonstrate, that traits fail us in some situations.[1]

In the Milgram experiments, unwitting volunteers became *teachers* who were asked to shock *learners* when they failed to make appropriate answers. Each time the learner failed, the voltage of the shock was dialed up 15 more volts. In those experiments, upwards of 65 percent of people were fully obedient and thought they were shocking innocent people to death at 450 volts (Doris, 2008: 39-42; Doris, 1998: 516, Kamtekar, 2004: 462-463; Vranas, 2004:4-6). Those "teachers" who were shocking "learners" did so with only neutral instructions that the experiment should continue. (Doris, 2008: 39-42; Doris, 1998: 516, Kamtekar, 2004: 462-463; Vranas, 2004:4-6) Doris concludes from this experiment and many others like it that traits are not global, but rather they are fragmented. Doris' situationism argument demonstrates that traits do not make us act consistently or predictably across varying situations where the same positive traits could be applied. We simply suffer from a "lack of character" in this model.

Now Doris' situationism is meant as an objection to virtue ethics theorists, where people believe that our character is or can be consistent. I don't have time to go into the details of

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[1] Definitions for traits are difficult to discover. Christine Swanton, in her work *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View,* outlines what she believes makes traits virtuous: "It is a disposition to respond in an excellent (or good enough) way (through the modes of respecting, appreciating, creating, loving, promoting, and so on) to items in the fields of the virtue" (Swanton, 2003: 93). I take the items mentioned here to be the nominal features of a given situation in which a moral choice will soon need to be made.

Aristotelian virtue ethics here but one defense for the virtue ethics theory against Doris'

situationism comes from Rachana Kamtekar who states:

> We should not be surprised by evidence that entities such as these [traits] are not responsible for much of our behavior. By contrast, the conception of character in virtue ethics is holistic and inclusive of how we reason: it is a person's character as a whole (rather than isolated character traits), that explains her actions, and this character is a more-or-less consistent, more or less integrated, set of motivations, including the person's desires, beliefs about the world and ultimate goals and values. (Kamtekar 2004: 460)

According to Kamtekar's interpretation of Aristotelian ethics, our traits are only a part of

the mix that creates character and hence they cannot be single-handedly blamed for our not

having character. I think Kamtekar is both right and wrong here. While I believe there is far

more depth to us than our traits, I think traits act as representative summaries of our holistic

"character". By 'summaries' I mean traits like "desiring to be on time" sit on the surface of our

moral selves where the trait of being on time represents the greater, deeper, more holistic part of

our moral centre. So in regards to desiring to be on time as a good personal trait, being on time

also represents the following but not complete list of morals and expected outcomes from our

holistic character: fulfilling a promised agreement; respecting other people in general by

respecting their time specifically; building rapport with others; pleasing others and ourselves for

being on time; and doing all these things because society deems them to be good (we are seen to

be complying with accepted morality standards) over failing to do them and reaping the negative

repercussions of having people dislike you (thereby losing rapport), and thinking you're

disrespectful, disorganized or forgetful.[2]

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[2] Sometimes it can be said that a person exhibits the negative trait of driving unsafely or of always being late. I say that these descriptions are not traits because they point to a lack in the moral core. If bad behaviour of this nature is not due to misreading the morality of the situation and selecting the wrong trait for the situation, but is instead a deliberate action, then these tendencies demonstrate a lacking in the moral core that shows a void in the representative summary of our holistic character whereby "caring" for others does not exist and it is the positive nature of our moral core that constitutes what comprises a trait.

I say that traits are summaries of our holistic character because being on time is a necessary and good trait that I have immediate access to in regards to making and keeping appointments with others. I know that being on time is a good thing for the reasons expressed under the holistic summary but I don't consciously tap into the deeper moral reasons behind being on time on a regular basis. I would only come up with the deeper, more holistic answer about what it means to my character to be on time generally were I to be asked why I think being on time is a good general trait to possess. To this end, traits like being on time or telling the truth are good, expedient tools used to aid us in automatically doing the proper moral action. Situations with morally salient features get thrown at us fast and furious and we don't have the time to check in with our deeper holistic moral centre when all we need are traits that represent our moral core. However, traits can become problematic when the moral situation requires applying competing traits where we fail to see which moral outcome is most desirable. I think, like Doris, that we suffer from normative incompetence; trait attribution error allows us to hide from our complete inability to decide which moral action we should choose in given situations. To discuss this I return to Doris.

Before I can define what "normative competence" is in morally salient situations I need to break down the two aspects Doris says we can find in any situation where moral implications exist: "Nominal features are actor independent 'objective' elements of situations …" (Doris, 2008: 76). So the world as it is presented to me creates the nominal features. Dad is in the hospital with weak lungs and putting him on a respirator may mean, with his weak lungs, that he will never get off that device. The moral implication is that in saving his life by putting him on the respirator I may enter him on the slippery slope of being kept alive by devices far longer than he may desire to live. Let me manage a small objection here. That there are normatively

significant features of situations doesn't mean that identifying the morally salient aspects of some situations is easy (Bransen, 2006: 5). Our problem lies not with the fact that there are morally salient aspects of situations, but in our ability to identify the morally relevant action we should take in those situations. We *should* want to come into alignment with the fact that we are shocking someone to death for no good reason and then we would stop. Yet we do not stop.

The second aspect of situations that Doris advances is that, "psychological features involve the subjective saliences the situation may have for a particular actor at a particular time" (Doris, 2008: 76). So because Bob's father ignored him when he was a child he has the psychological feature of being desperate for approval from people in authority. Thus, instead of being able to see the nominal features of the world in the Milgram experiment, Bob reacts from his tortured psychological features given to him in his childhood and he obeys the experimenter and he shocks someone to death.

Let me summarize things to date. In order to comprehend the nominal features of a situation we need to accurately identify the nominal features and overcome our own psychological features that prevent us from accurately reading the nominal features. Only then do deliberators have a chance to achieve normative competence. They would be working with the proper aspects of the nominal features for this situation and hence they would know what they ought to do. But there is a major problem in that most of us are horrible at reading situations accurately:

> Our default position regarding 'normal' adults is to hold them responsible for their actions; unlike the hopelessly deranged, we assume that they do not suffer global impairments of normative competence. But any normal adult might be in circumstances which effect local impairments of normative competence, such as *difficult-to-interpret situations that prevent acquisition of morally significant information*. In these circumstances, normal adults have something in common with the legally insane; they are unable to properly appreciate normatively relevant considerations. (Doris, 2008: 138-139) (italics mine)

Doris wants to examine the following: I am normally held responsible for my actions but the problem is I may have an inability to comprehend all of the nominal features because I've never seen them in this particular pattern. Or I might have long or short-term psychological features preceding this event which prevent me from reading the nominal features of the situation accurately. A long-term psychological feature would be like the one cited above where Bob wants approval from people in authority because his father ignored him when Bob was a child. A short-term psychological feature can be explained from the 1972 Isen and Levin phone booth dime experiment. In cases where 14 people found a dime in a phone booth whereby they turned around and saw a confederate of the experiment drop some papers, 12 of them stopped to help the paper-dropper. Of the 25 who did not find a dime in the phone booth, only one helped the confederate paper-dropper (Isen and Levin, 1972: 387). The researchers called the effect of finding the dime or being given a cookie the "warm glow of success" (Isen and Levin, 1972: 384) but it only lasts for a few minutes.

John Bargh, in his co-authored paper, "Automaticity of Social Behavior: Direct Effects of Trait Construct and Stereotype Activation on Action," calls incidental activation of traits brought about by current situational context "priming" (Bargh, 1996, 230). So once we're "primed" in a certain manner, we can act automatically or unintentionally. I maintain that automaticity or unintentional action due to priming and its effect upon our psychological features prevents us from being able to read the morally relevant aspects of a situation correctly. In other words, once we're primed, we continue to act on the same path. Find a dime and you're primed to help someone else. If you don't find a dime you're primed to walk past the paper dropper. So once I'm primed to help the scientist, I automatically follow through with positive actions to fulfill my obligations and commitment to the scientist. I can act outside what people consider to be my

character and I "shock" someone to death. I do so because I fail to see that while appeasing the person running the experiment by being a person of good traits who fulfills his agreements, I am a horrible person who makes bad moral choices overall because I cannot effectively read the moral requirements of the situation.

It appears to me that, due to our inability to accurately read the morally salient aspects of a situation, we are normatively *incompetent*:

> Normative competence involves, among other things, whatever cognitive capacities are required for effective deliberation. Deliberation is effective when it secures conformity between the deliberator's evaluative commitments and the plan, policy, or decision the deliberator endorses; the effective deliberator is one able to determine what is conducive to the "implementation" of her values. (Doris, 2008: 136-137)

Having normative competence must require the mental capacity to read the nominal features of a situation accurately and to overcome our psychological features which make identifying those nominal features so difficult. Now I'm coming to the position which I think is key. When my psychological features prevent me from reading the morally salient aspects of a situation accurately, Doris says, "In these circumstances, normal adults have something in common with the legally insane; they are unable to properly appreciate normatively relevant considerations." Think about what that statement means. Were I to admit that I cannot interpret the normatively relevant or moral considerations of a specific situation, I would be admitting that I don't really know what is going on, at least morally, in the world. I would be no better off than the legally insane. I can look at situations, fail to interpret the relevant moral considerations, in large part because my psychological features prevent me from identifying things accurately, and I cannot behave with good character because I don't know what I should be doing. In the void created by not comprehending what a person of good character would do in the situation, and having a

readily available secondary moral situation I can identify for myself, I may well embrace the trait which guides my actions to perform the lesser of the two moral choices.

Now I want to demonstrate that psychological features can prevent us from seeing the morally salient aspects of a situation and, in utilizing this example, we come to see the heart of the trait attribution error. A therapist explained to me what can happen in moral situations in regards to adult survivors of child abuse. Adult survivors of child abuse typically do not receive all the psychological tools required to be able to discern the nominal features in life. For example, take an argument between Cindy and Dave at work. Bob watches them argue and learns that they can get *really* angry. Because Bob spent 18 years being terrorized by his out-of-control father who yelled and screamed at anyone he could find, Bob is scared out of his wits when observing Cindy and Dave fight. Bob, who would desire to avoid any scenario where he might do something to become worthy of being yelled at, thinks Cindy and Dave are jerks or "potential yellers" who should be avoided at all costs. But to others raised in non-abusive households, they are merely glad that Cindy and Dave cleared the air. Once the argument is over, a mistake has been fixed and will not be repeated again. Later it may well be that Cindy and Dave could chat amiably over lunch in the cafeteria. Seeing them together at lunch would prove to Bob that these people are 'nuts'. But on an inner, semi-conscious level Bob knows he is failing to comprehend the nominal features of this situation. An hour later, Bob hears two other office workers discussing the big blow between Cindy and Dave and they are glad the two of them straightened things out. Not comprehending things from this point of view, Bob feels even worse because he thinks his interpretation of them being "crazy people" is the correct one. However, Bob also unconsciously senses that there is a tension in the air because he's alone in his assessment. What Bob suffers from is this sense of feeling insane … he cannot see the

morally salient aspects of the situation because he doesn't have the cognitive capacity required to give him the proper interpretation.

Bargh would attribute this inner sense of knowing-but-not-knowing as being preconscious. In the past, Bargh admits that psychologists felt that preconscious, automatic activation was limited solely to perception and evaluation. But Bargh believes preconscious behaviour can be tied to trait-relevant behaviour such that each time a similar event might happen, that the same trait and resulting actions based upon that trait would be automatic (Bargh, 1996: 231). So, when someone yells, Bob will react in the same terrified manner each time, even though he is "preconscious" about what is happening to him and he senses that he ought not to react this way.

The point is that we all meet up with moral situations where potential bias prevents us from effectively reading the morally relevant aspects of a situation. No one likes feeling incompetent about engaging the moral situations of the world on a fundamental level. But to get to the truth of what the proper moral action is in a situation for Bob would mean examining his psychological features that prevent him from identifying the morally salient aspects of the world. Even in therapy, folks like Bob can reject performing the exercises required to heal them because they do not want to reencounter the psychological trauma experienced as a child. I argue that the rest of us feel similarly about opening the can of worms we would find in our own psychological past. Because the trait attribution error gives us "good person" status for selecting a positive trait to "a" moral choice, it alleviates the necessity of exploring our psychological past so that we could actually change as people and become someone who can accurately read the normative aspects of given situations such that we could select "the" right moral action. Trait attribution error releases us from blame for our poor moral action. And because of this reluctance to

explore our psychology, our ability to become more virtuous by becoming someone who reads situations accurately and thereby doing the right moral action will never arise.

Foucault wrote, "All we have to do is "mak[e] the discourse [we] hear, the discourse [we] recognize as being true or which the philosophical tradition has passed on to [us] as true, [our] own" (Foucault, 2005: 333). So what we should want is to identify the morally salient aspects of the world such that we can make the proper moral choices. But I argue that because learning to do so would open up our psychology and because we resist wanting to open it up, we must really "want" something different. We must want the world to adjust to how we see it, such that it makes sense in relation to our own psychological short-comings. Hence trait attribution error gives us a favorable perspective of ourselves as positive moral agents even when we are not.

Think of the Milgram experiment again. In this situation there is an option to utilize one of two positive traits linked to two sets of our holistic moral code but there is only one proper moral choice. Due to normative incompetence, we select the wrong, but traditionally decent, honorable trait to fulfill what is normally a morally acceptable action. It is important to note that traits never let us down, but that our normative competence fails to identify the morally salient aspect of the situation. Trait attribution error allows us to look as though we are good moral agents when we select "a" positive trait to perform an acceptable moral action over the problem of our normative incompetence which prevents us from doing "the" proper moral action. I say that we fail to make the proper moral choice because our negative psychology creates bias which prevents us from correctly interpreting the morally salient aspects of the situation, which in turn makes us normatively incompetent. Accepting that we suffer from normative incompetence would mean admitting that we are *bad* moral agents, *and* that we don't know what is going on in the world, at least, morally. To accept the truth about our bad moral agent status, we would be

compelled to face our negative psychology and facing our negative psychology is what we want to avoid because the emotional cost is too great for us to bear. So we are glad for the fact that trait attribution error lets us off the hook from being bad moral agents in the way that it does.

An objection to my argument, that psychological trauma harms our cognitive capacity to do the right moral action, might stem from the fact that we select the trait which is simply more expedient and which takes less thought. The objection that we'll do the moral act which links to the most readily accessible trait carries some weight. When we examine the John Darley and Daniel Batson Princeton seminarian study, we see some truth to doing that which is easier and faster over that which we must seriously think about. In that study, two groups of seminarians are asked to deliver a talk on the Good Samaritan story. One group is told that they are already late while the second is told they have time, but might as well head over to the building where they are going to deliver their talk. Along the pathway between buildings, individuals of both groups find a homeless confederate of the test. Of those in a hurry, only 10 percent stopped to help, while of those who had time, 63 percent stopped to help (Gladwell, 2000, 163-165, Kamtekar, 2004, 463-464). The point is that seminarians, who would state that one reason why they entered ministry is to help the homeless, will sometimes step over the body of a homeless person while on the way to delivering a talk about a Samaritan who helps a homeless person!

To counter this objection, I offer two arguments. First, I think reliance upon our traits to immediately reflect our deeper holistic moral core creates its own short-term psychological feature that prevents us from changing our moral decision: traits are primers that set us on an automatic behavioural pathway. Here's what I mean. If we look through a moral "slow-motion" camera, we see that the seminarians don't have a choice between two moral actions at the same time, but that one follows the other. In utilizing the positive trait, that of complying with a

professor's wishes, the actions that come with the trait become top of mind and it is difficult to see the morally salient aspects of the next situation. Now we rely upon traits to accurately reflect our holistic moral core and because we do, we make positive moral choices.

When a new moral choice comes along when we're already attempting to fulfill a previous one, however, we're bamboozled. First, we have been primed to follow the acceptable instructions of the professor. Second, admitting that we should change to perform a new action seems to suggest to us that we were morally "wrong" in regards to our previous decision, or that we will disappoint our instructor in failing to appear on time, and so we act deplorably and we miss seeing the homeless person altogether. Gilbert believes that the narrow step-by-step nature of the Milgram experiments made it even easier to comply with shocking from one voltage to the next (Gilbert, 1981: 691). I argue that each successive shocking event creates its own short-term psychological feature suggesting that if the previous shock was acceptable, that the next one "must" be acceptable as well. Otherwise, we would once again have to investigate our psychology to explore why we "unethically" shocked at the last voltage.

Additionally complicating matters is our natural trait of believing that most people are good and that they wouldn't ask unethical things of us or that they wouldn't concoct moral situations to trick us into being unethical. Under these conditions, it is difficult to identify how we have a chance of getting things ethically right. It's natural and usually ethical to comply with an instructor's wish to go to the next building in order to deliver a talk about the Good Samaritan. In this scenario, then, we can comply with a good person's wishes because we have a natural trait to want to comply with positive leaders. Here our trait to comply with others has created a short-term psychological feature that primes our upcoming actions and this leads us to

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fail to identify the morally salient aspects of the next situation: that of a homeless person being on the pathway.

Taking a look at the Milgram experiment, then, we understand why the teachers had a hard time believing that a "good" scientist could create an experiment that would allow a teacher to shock someone to death. Likewise how could a German soldier come to believe that his ordinary, every-day "commander", a man just like him, would order him to perform horrendous acts? Thus, it is easy to perform moral actions linked with readily accessible traits that act as primers because the traits fall within our training (delivering speeches) or human norms (following orders). However, it is difficult to overcome our short-term psychological features and the *priming effect* when the situation changes whereby we discover we are compelled to do another moral act, where we must disappoint individuals in authority and overcome our automaticity due to priming.

Now I want to deal with another objection, that following orders is not a positive trait. It has been argued that "blindly following orders" is not a *good* trait. I disagree on the following grounds. I disagree because, first, most people have our best interests at heart so having the trait to comply with a parent yelling at us not to touch the hot stove element, or a commander telling us to circle right to take the hill, can save us from injury or death. In addition, because traits are "representative summaries of our holistic character," I find it difficult to discern any negative aspects of our holistic moral core that makes following orders of "assumed" good people a bad thing to do: the desire to please a superior; the acknowledgement that sometimes superiors know what is better for us than we may know ourselves and hence my safety can be secured, etc. I realize that there is a gateway argument here about negative paternalism or parentalism, but those notions have more negative moral implications for the order giver than the order follower.

Not included in the list of things in our moral core in regards to following instructions is the desire to follow instruction so we can be made to be seen as immoral. I can discern no deliberate negative intent in regards to the trait of following orders.

I agree that following orders can produce bad moral outcomes for the reasons given in this paper. I'm assuming that the notion of following orders is perceived to be bad when the order might lead to another unethical action. But trait attribution error is about giving ourselves "good moral agent status" by having the positive motives and goals and desires for performing a trait-related action in a situation which contains a moral component where there are two or more moral choices and where we have failed to make the right moral choice. Consider a situation where it appears moral to have the trait to comply with instructions where we're being asked to commit an immoral act. Ordinarily the problem with doing that which is immoral has to do with our normative incompetence, our inability to discern which moral action we ought to do in a given situation. The problem arises for any positive trait like following orders, when it becomes a long or short-term psychological feature of its very own which then prevents us from seeing the morally salient aspect of the *next* situation. In other words, when a trait becomes a short-term psychological feature where we are primed to behave similarly in trait-relevant situations, then the trait acts as a primer whereby applying it in the wrong situation makes us immoral. We can act automatically based on the trait as opposed to acting from moral awareness. Acting automatically is the real culprit in this objection. So, following orders is normally a good thing and, in the Milgram experiments, I follow the scientist's instructions to shock. At first the trait to follow orders succeeds brilliantly as no one is seriously harmed and everyone is pleased. In regards to the individual being shocked, they are not *seriously* harmed by the shocker's trait of "following orders." But now the trait of applying shocks to follow the orders of the scientist

creates its own short-term psychological feature that it is "okay" to shock at level 300 and hence, it must be acceptable to shock at 315 volts. Now our ability to examine why it might be wrong to shock at 315 volts must be examined in the context of it having just been acceptable to shock at 300. And if that was wrong, we would have to ask, what is wrong with our psychology that we could shock at 300 volts? In the wake of not desiring to examine our psychology to learn how we could have been wrong at the 300 volt mark (for fear we discover we are immoral or defective moral agents), our short-term psychological feature that it was "okay to shock at 300 volts" carries over to our decision that it must be acceptable to shock at 315 volts. So when our trait to follow orders becomes a psychological short-term feature that hinders our ability to discern the nominal features of morality in the next situation, then yes, following orders can be harmful or wrong, but it is not the trait in itself that is wrong. Bargh calls the auto-pilot effect created by situations like an engaged trait and the on-going resulting actions of engaging that trait, "acting from automaticity" (Bargh 1996: 230).

Now to conclude this theoretical section, I argue that the trait attribution error does many things. First it explains why we selected the positive trait allowing us to perform the wrong moral action, because all traits do connect to our holistic moral character. Second, trait attribution error allows us to see ourselves conducting a positive moral action and prevents us from identifying our normative incompetence and the psychological features that create our normative incompetence. Third, trait attribution error absolves us from blame in having selected the wrong of two or more different moral actions because most traits connect with a positive moral core; that we missed making the *right moral choice appears irrelevant in the trait attribution error*. This is why people can justify doing the immediately accessible trait-related moral action (because they are trait-primed) over the more thoughtful, less accessible trait-

related action. We can go to the gallows while claiming in our defense that we were only doing what was asked of us, despite the fact that what was being asked of us was a deplorable action. Last, trait attribution error allows us to ignore examining why we performed the wrong moral action. Let's face it, the emotional cost of accepting why we performed the wrong moral action is too high. Were we compelled to face why we performed the wrong moral action, we would be compelled to fully accept blame for the action, and we would need to examine our dark psychological problems which led to the error in assessing the normative aspect of the situation. When it comes to dealing with our negative psychology we would do anything, including accepting the excuse that the trait attribution error offers, over facing our psychology and admitting that we simply do not know what is going on in the world in a moral sense.

Recommendations

The challenge of suffering from normative incompetence due to long and short-term psychological features preventing us from identifying the morally salient aspects of situations, in part because we are primed and act with automaticity, is that we must somehow be able to overcome this problem in our lives in a practical manner. What I believe I have expressed in my paper is the danger that trait attribution error allows us to live in a world of auto-pilot or automaticity. Another way of stating that is that we are not in full awareness of the world or that we are not cognitively morally engaged. A part of the problem, as I see it, is that because we allow traits which tap into our deeper moral core or character to operate preconsciously, we allow our moral character to be duped when *difficult-to-interpret situations that prevent acquisition of morally significant information* arise. The great problem with recommendations is that sometimes they are "easier said than done."

The first recommendation I can offer is simply to acknowledge what I have stated already. In knowing how easy it is for us to have short-term psychological features dupe us into selecting actions from preconscious mental states like traits, we become aware of the immediate danger that we can be easily led away from our moral compass (Bargh, 1996: 242). Even the words we utilize can create a short-term psychological feature which may prevent us from behaving morally. In Bargh's scrambled sentence test, two groups of people work with sentences where participants are asked to unscramble the sentences. One group has an additional set of words such as "worried," "Florida," "old," "lonely," "gray," "bingo" and "wrinkle" in their sentences. After participants unscrambled their sentences, in approximately five minutes the real test began. Those who worked with the special set of words walked to the elevator more slowly than those who did not (Gladwell, 2000, 52-56.) While it is unclear how long the effect lasts, repeated exposure in contaminated environments may impact our short-term psychology such that the behaviour becomes a long-term psychological problem and it seems to me that longer-term problems would be more difficult to overcome. Bargh goes so far as claiming that this process may be addictive (Bargh, 1996, 231). So by being aware of the fact that we can be primed, we should be more morally aware more often.

Second, by being aware of and able to identify negative psychological environments, we must find the moral courage to extract ourselves from these situations or otherwise we will risk becoming poor identifiers of morally salient situations. However, leaving an abusive relationship is tremendously difficult and being a child where abuse is taking place hardly seems as though it is the child's responsibility to exit when such an individual is not a fully-formed moral agent. The solution to this conundrum would have to fall to government agencies or their representatives.

Third keeping a morality journal seems wise. Plato wrote, "an unexamined life is not worth living for a human being" (Plato 2002: *Apology*, 38A). In relation to this suggestion, I believe we need to hold or cultivate the trait to be doggedly persistent.[3] At the end of each day, write something about the morality of your day. "I put on my running shoes. I wonder where they were made. Tomorrow I will conduct an Internet search to see if the manufacturer makes shoes in sweatshops in developing countries." Of course the trick is to "do the search" and then to take a moral action, like personally boycotting that company, should you feel that you cannot morally wear shoes that take advantage of another.[4] Bargh maintains that social behaviour is like any other psychological reaction to a social situation (Bargh, 1996: 231). I would argue if we are acting from automaticity based on traits, that failure to keep ourselves in awareness may make us susceptible to engage in behaviour we would normally consider to be immoral.

My last positive recommendation is to create our own positive primer to remind us to be in moral awareness. Place a sticky coloured dot on the face of your watch (you use your own favorite colour) or on the button of your air conditioning in your car and every time you see the dot, you mentally check in with your deeper moral core about the current *moral* action you are taking. To work long term this strategy needs to be ever-evolving. Our psychology, as far as I can identify it, *wants to operate in a non-awareness mode* because we continue to default to our automatic traits. I say this because that which becomes common for us is something that we take for granted and once we take our moral actions for granted, we create the opportunity to slide back into letting our traits work automatically. So for an unspecified period of time whenever we look at the dot on our watch or our car's steering wheel, we will become morally aware, If we do this one time and the dot does not bring us into awareness, then the effect is lost. So we will

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[3] I'm going out to buy one for myself in a few hours.
[4] Some have argued that while sweatshops are bad they are still better than the alternative: that the person working in the sweatshop would have an even worse life if it weren't for the sweatshop.

have to be "actively engaged" in finding new ways to help ourselves think morally until we create our own long-term psychological feature that make us more morally aware on a regular basis.

There is one *don't* in my recommendations. Due to the irony process model effect, it is best to cease trying "not" to do something (Bargh, 1996: 232). Bargh writes, "For present purposes, the importance of these findings is that the mere act of thinking about a response, even when the thought involved is meant to help prevent that response, has the automatic effect of increasing the likelihood of that response" (Bargh, 1996: 232). Telling this story to last night's waiter invoked anecdotal proof of the irony process model. A complaint had been made about a particular server because she had been touching herself, apparently inappropriately, such as running fingers through her hair and readjusting her shirt while talking to the customer. So everyone had training in regards to standing still while not fidgeting with their hair and clothing. My server said, "For a week I kept adjusting my hair and shirt and I had never done that before." He acted inappropriately because he was trying *not* to act inappropriately. The recommendation here is to envision how we see ourselves behaving in a positive manner rather than in how we *don't want to behave*. But this recommendation only works when we can know what situation is about to arise. It is hard to envision how to act in the next situation when we cannot predict what that situation will be.

To conclude, I don't think "traits running on auto-pilot" is a *necessarily* bad *modus operandi*; most of the time this morality system we have created lets us act morally. The problem is we can allow our traits to dictate our moral actions because they themselves act as primers, and when the trait becomes its own psychological feature that prevents us from identifying the morally salient features of the next situation, we are bamboozled and we can err

to the point of behaving abominably because we are acting from automaticity. The question is, "Do we take a little extra time to keep a morality journal so we can learn and grow and actively think morally, or do we risk acting abominably, when an unpredictable situation comes along where all the brown-eyed people want to eradicate the blue-eyed people?" We can act from automaticity or awareness. The choice is, of course, up to us.

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