THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO VIRTUE ETHICS

Edited by
Lorraine Besser-Jones and
Michael Slote

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THE SITUATIONIST CRITIQUE

Lorraine Besser-Jones

Introduction

You have always thought of your friend Joe as a compassionate person, who cares about the plights of others and is always willing to help where he can. Your friend Jane, on the other hand, you would describe as much more self-centered, as one who puts her own needs first. When pressed to guess who would be the most likely to help a stranger, your answer is clear: Joe would. He's the compassionate one.

But empirical research suggests that whether Jane helps or Joe helps seems to have much more to do with the particular aspects of the situation they find themselves in, rather than with the dispositions we tend to attribute to them.

Consider the influential experiments on helping behavior run by Isen and Levin (1972). The design of the experiment was to test the effects of good mood, primed by finding a dime, on one's helping behavior. Subjects were individuals using a pay phone in a shopping mall. The experimental group found an unexpected dime in the coin slot, while the control group did not. As they were walking away from the pay phone, subjects in both groups were then confronted with a female confederate who, while walking past them, dropped a folder full of papers in the subject's path.

The question was, who would help? The answer is surprising: with the exception of one, the only subjects who helped were ones that had found an unexpected dime. Only one subject in the control group of 25 who did not find the dime helped. In contrast, 14 out of 16 in the experimental group, who did find the dime, helped.

Imagine, now, that your friends Joe and Jane were placed in this kind of experiment. As tempting as it is to predict that Joe would be the one to help rather than Jane, given the above results, it seems mistaken to try to make any prediction independently of knowing which group Joe and Jane were assigned to, and so of knowing whether or not either had found the unexpected dime. This, it seems, is the significant factor in determining who is going to help.

Isen and Levin's experiment is just one of dozens supporting the thesis that behavior is determined by situational factors. Other well-known experiments include the Milgram experiments (Milgram 1974), in which subjects find themselves administering shocks to individuals who can't seem to get the right answer to a word-association test simply because they are told to do so, and the Stanford Prison experiments (Haney et al. 1973), in which subjects find themselves treating fellow subjects, who differ from them only in being assigned to a "prisoner" group rather than a "guard" group, sadistically, simply because they are the guards and the others are the prisoners.

Taken as a whole, these lines of experiments constitute a significant challenge to virtue ethics, and especially to Aristotelian virtue ethics. Virtue ethics advocates developing character traits, which, on Aristotle's view, are interpreted to be robust dispositional traits, i.e. traits that lead us to act in similar fashions across a wide range of situations. This is the kind of thing we mean when we say that Joe is compassionate: we mean that he possesses a character trait that will lead him to act compassionately in pretty much whatever situation he finds himself in that calls for compassion. The assumption underlying this framework is that character traits are the causal determinants of behavior, such that when Joe acts compassionately, his behavior is best explained by the fact that he is compassionate. The situationist critique calls this assumption into question, arguing that behavior is best explained by situational influences, rather than by character traits.

The situationist critique raises important questions regarding the viability of virtue ethics and defenders of virtue ethics have taken these questions in stride, making a number of different attempts to defend the virtue ethical framework against the challenge the critique presents. In what follows, I will begin by exploring the critique specifically as it is targeted against the Aristotelian framework. I'll then move to reflect on some of the central themes the situationist critique raises that ought to have a long standing impact on how we think about virtue ethics, and normative ethics more generally.

Is Aristotelian Virtue Ethics Really Vulnerable to the Situationist Critique?

We've seen the charge: virtue ethics calls for the development of robust dispositional traits, which lead us to act in predictable ways across a range of situations. But empirical research suggests that situations, rather than character traits, are the causal determinants of our behavior. So, virtue ethics is fundamentally mistaken in its very understanding of agency. Can it really be this quick?

John Doris (2002) and Gilbert Harman (2000) develop the situationist critique most forcefully against the Aristotelian virtue ethical framework. On their interpretation of this framework, the virtues just are robust dispositional traits, which lead their possessor to act in a reliable and predictable fashion. And, as

with any dispositional trait, the only evidence of its existence is through its behavioral manifestation. A person possesses the disposition of honesty to the extent that she is disposed to be honest. According to the situationist critique, this framework and the normative ideal it presents falls flat in light of the kinds of experiments discussed above, which call into question the very existence of character traits, where these character traits are taken to be essentially robust dispositional traits.

As we begin to think about the implications of this critique, it is worth noting the very real question of whether the line of experiments the critique draws upon adequately test behavior that manifests virtuous dispositions. Consider, for instance, the dime experiments described above. Should picking up papers for a stranger really serve as the test case for whether or not an agent is compassionate? Several have argued that the behaviors explored in the experiments do not track virtue or any manifestly moral trait (Sabini and Silver 2005; Sreenivasan 2002). If the behaviors in question are not manifestations of moral traits, then a failure to exhibit the behaviors tells us very little about the agent's moral traits.

There's something to this. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that there is any one incidence that can serve as a marker of virtue. This is particularly true for Aristotelian virtue ethics, which emphasizes the role of practical reasoning and context sensitivity in determining the virtuous act, and resists any efforts to formulate rules or guidelines for behavior. While "picking up papers for a stranger" might seem to be the virtuous act, within the Aristotelian framework, there is no way we can know this independently of knowing more details about the situation and the agent in question.

The situationist critique seems to depend upon making the move from the fact that in many instances individuals fail to exhibit robust dispositional traits to the claim that attributions of robust dispositional traits in general are unwarranted. Whether or not this move is warranted depends on whether or not there are grounds for thinking that virtues have some kind of resiliency, which other kinds of traits lack. For the sake of discussion, though, let's assume that there is enough research to call into question our attribution of robust dispositional traits, even if the specific experiments do not track precisely the kind of behavior Aristotle or other virtue ethicists had in mind. Giving the situationist critique this much opens up the door for reflection on two related aspects of virtue ethics. The first is the degree to which actual behavior plays a role in the possession of virtues. The second concerns the degree of correlation between traits and behavior requisite to make the virtue ethicists' appeal to robust dispositional traits meaningful.

The role of behavior within virtue ethics

A distinctive aspect of virtue ethics is that it takes the development of a virtuous character as its primary aim. Virtue ethicists are interested in what kind of person

one is, and what kind of person one should strive to be. To the extent that most virtue ethicists focus on behavior, behavior comes into play only indirectly, insofar as an agent's behavior can be taken to reflect something about her character. Behavior thus serves as a litmus test for virtue but not necessarily as the definitive aspect of virtue. This opens the door for a virtue ethicist to argue that even if an agent's behavior is influenced by situational factors, that agent might still possess virtue. Let's consider a little more how this would go with respect to the Aristotelian framework, which serves as the original target for the situationist critique.

While it seems clear that Aristotle does present a view of the virtues that includes dispositions to behave in certain ways, many have argued that behavioral dispositions reflect only one component of virtue (e.g., Kamtekar 2004; Swanton 2003). On this interpretation, to possess the virtues is not only to behave in certain ways but, rather, possession of the virtues includes also beliefs about the virtues and the circumstances that call for them, emotional dispositions to respond affectively, and, perhaps most importantly, the practical reason to know how to piece all these components together.

How does this more inclusive understanding of the virtues affect the situationist critique? Most clearly, it suggests that we cannot read a lack of virtue off from an agent's failure to display a behavioral disposition towards compassion, honesty, and so forth. That a person fails to behave in a certain way gives us some information about her character traits, but does not indicate a lack of character traits, as the critique contends.

Consider, as Swanton (2003) does, how this inclusive perspective interprets the results of the Milgram experiments. Subjects in the Milgram experiments may have repeatedly pressed the button that would administer shocks—and so in this regard displayed a lack of compassion. But we also know that many of them suffered anguish and distress over the course of the experiment, no doubt as they juggled their obligations to respect authority and to follow through with their commitments with their reluctance to administer the shocks. This kind of a look past the behavior and into the state of mind of the agent is revealing and ought to lead us to question whether we can read a *complete* lack of virtue off of a failure to exhibit a behavioral disposition. More likely, what we have is someone who lacks full virtue, and struggles to act virtuously in the face of competing pressures. This picture, as Miller (2003) reminds us, is perfectly consistent with the Aristotelian framework whereby full virtue comes only through habituation and reinforcement through time.

These lead us to the second consideration, which regards how much of a correlation we ought to expect to hold between a trait and its associated behavior. This point is nicely developed by Slingerland (2011). He criticizes defenders of situationism for setting too high a bar for this correlation. According to Slingerland, defenders of situationism assume that, within virtue ethics, the correlation between possession of the virtue and its associated

behavior must be at a 1.0. This would mean that in order to attribute a virtue to an individual, she must always display it. On this reading, there is no room for leniency when it comes to virtue attribution. If a person has a virtue, she's got to be acting on it. Now, we've seen already that this position might not be tenable, as it can be difficult to determine exactly which behaviors manifest virtue. Nonetheless, the question it points to is one worth exploring. If we take it as given that, for Aristotle, at least one important component of virtue is being disposed to act in a certain way, where ought we to draw the lines? At what point is it wrong to attribute a disposition to someone who doesn't always manifest that disposition in her behavior? Slingerland makes a compelling case for thinking that the standard correlation tracked in many of the studies situationists cite—a correlation of 0.3—is not at all negligible, and demonstrates at least some predictive reliability of dispositional traits. Regardless of where we come down on just how much is enough—and specifically, how much is enough for Aristotelian virtue ethics—it seems pretty clear that a virtue ethics that allows for various degrees of virtue possession will be more plausible in this respect.

Thus far we have seen that the situationist critique raises important questions regarding the role of behavior within the Aristotelian framework. We've also seen some plausible avenues a defender of this framework might explore, such as emphasizing the inclusive nature of virtue and recognizing that possession of virtue may come in degrees. Let's now turn to consider some of the larger questions raised by the situationist critique—questions with which, given the influence of the critique, any defender of virtue ethics must now wrestle. These questions concern first, the nature of character, and second, the extent to which virtue ethics ought to be sensitive to concerns of empirical adequacy.

The Nature of Character

The situationist critique, at its most fundamental level, demands that we re-examine our everyday thinking about character. And this is a demand that many philosophers have taken quite seriously. Before we begin to explore these responses, it will help to take a more formal look at the "standard" conception of character the critique calls into question. I have so far described the character traits in question as robust dispositional traits, which lead their possessor to act in a similar fashion across a range of circumstances. This notion of robust dispositional traits stems from what Doris (2002) describes as a *globalist* conception of character. Distinctive to the globalist conception are the positions that character traits are cross-situationally consistent and stable. Most of the theories of character that have been developed as a response to the situationist literature and the research it highlights make some sort of departure from globalism. We'll start by looking at the most extreme departure: trait eliminitivism.

Trait Eliminitivism. Trait eliminitivism, a position most notably defended by Harman (2000), is exactly what the name suggests: the suggestion to do away completely with any talk of character traits. Harman defends trait eliminitivism on the grounds that if we continue to invoke the language of character traits, and to (mistakenly) attribute character traits to individuals, we will continue to overlook the significant role situational factors play in our everyday actions. Abandoning talk of character, in contrast, will allow us to better understand one another and to begin thinking more productively about how to handle the situational factors that have such an influence on our behavior.

Local Traits. More moderate than trait eliminitivism but still radical in its complete rejection of globalism is the position that character traits are local ones. Local traits are specific to situations and stable to those situations, but lack cross-situational consistency. This position is developed by Doris (2002) at length. It preserves our intuitions that there are some things we can predict of individuals, while taking very seriously the known impact situational factors have on our behavior. Where these factors are relatively constant, local traits, specific to these factors, emerge. Doris thus grants that one can be honest to her spouse, or in the workplace. But he denies this trait any cross-situational consistency. We can't know that the person who is honest to her spouse will be honest in the workplace, and vice-versa.

Doris's endorsement of local traits has influenced many to develop similar conceptions of character. Merritt (2000), for example, defends a version of the local trait approach that she finds in Hume. Her view emphasizes the role social features play in sustaining the local traits, making them relatively stable across time. Like Doris's version, Merritt's version accommodates the influence of situational factors upon our behavior and unapologetically so. Pointing to Hume's observation that what counts is the beneficial tendency of our motives, not that the motives themselves are self-sufficient, Merritt argues that there is nothing wrong with recognizing that traits are largely dependent upon social factors.

The local trait approach thus tries to provide some basis for trait attribution that is consistent with the rejection of globalism defenders of this approach take to be warranted by the empirical studies. The next approach we will consider tries to balance showing a sensitivity to these studies with preserving the intuitive appeal of globalism.

Global Traits. Both Snow (2010) and Russell (2009) present a view of traits that is based upon Mischel and Shoda's (1995) cognitive-affective processing system (CAPS). This model emphasizes the ways in which behavior flows from the nature in which an individual responds to external situational factors. It holds that behavior cannot be read off of the situational factors, but that how an individual acts depends upon how she interprets those factors.

Snow argues that the CAPS model presents an attractive framework from which to interpret the virtues. It holds that traits make meaningful references to features of the agent insofar as they reflect the agent's perception of the situation and her interpretation of it—CAPS traits thus genuinely tell us something about the person and this fits nicely with virtue ethic's agent-oriented emphasis. Moreover, CAPS traits are stable and, according to Snow's reading of the research, have the potential to be global. Closely related to the CAPS model is Miller's (2010, 2013) interpretation of global helping traits. Global helping traits consist in clusters of mental states, such as beliefs and desires, which mediate an agent's response to external triggers and play a causal role in prompting helping behavior.

Both of these approaches (the CAPS model and Miller's global helping traits) defend global traits by zeroing in on the internal and subjective features of the agent that interact with external and objective situational factors. This emphasis on the individual's subjective construal of situations is largely absent from the local trait approach, which prioritizes the external and objective influences on one's behavior.

Character Holism. The views we have considered so far work squarely within the language of traits and, as we have seen, take the central task of responding to the situationist critique to be coming to terms with the nature of our particular dispositions. In Besser-Jones (2008, 2014), I take a different approach by defending a holistic view of character, which I argue best allows us to make sense of the behavioral patterns exhibited in the studies, and to address the problems these patterns illustrate, which is that people, in general, do a pretty bad job of acting well.

The view of character I defend takes moral character to consist in one's moral commitments, one's dispositions to act, how it is that one's moral commitments influence and interact with one's behavioral dispositions. The advantages of this holistic view are two-fold: First, it allows us to see that the problem raised by the situationist critique is one of there being a gap between one's moral commitments and one's behavioral dispositions. Second, it points us clearly to what I argue ought to be our central normative task: bridging this gap.

This move away from a trait approach calls for an overhaul in how we think about virtue, a project I explore at length in Besser-Jones (2014). The final response to the situationist critique I'll consider, though, maintains, on very unique grounds that even if character traits—be they global or local—do not exist, there is still a meaningful purpose to be had by embracing the traditional understanding of virtues as robust dispositional traits.

Factitious character traits. Alfano's (2013) response to the situationist critique takes a radically different approach from the other responses we have considered. Alfano grants, for the sake of argument, at least, that the critique succeeds, and

shows the Aristotelian analysis of virtues as robust dispositional traits to be empirically inadequate. Nonetheless, Alfano argues that even if these virtues do not exist, we ought to continue to attribute virtues to others, for virtue attributions can function as self-fulfilling prophecies (2013: 82–83). Under the right circumstances, believing you are virtuous may lead you to become virtuous.

Alfano defends this claim by appeal to a range of empirical research on related phenomena such as the placebo effect and the effects of labeling and self-concept. In addition to bringing this new line of research to the discussion, Alfano's approach also stands out as taking a distinct focus on the practical side of virtue ethics, which he takes to be, quite simply, getting people to act virtuously—a point I'll have more to say about in the next section.

Each of these models of character tries to develop an understanding of character that accommodates the central thrust of the situationist critique, which is that situational factors have a surprisingly large influence on behavior. Defenders of each of these models also claim empirical support for their models, often by looking beyond the set of studies favored by the situationist to data from other lines of research. As each of these models has different implications for the nature and possibility of virtue ethics, those sympathetic to the situationist critique will want to think carefully through the implications of each model.

Psychological Realism

Any evaluation of the situationist critique and the models of character that have been developed as responses to it will require coming to terms with the degree to which one thinks a virtue ethics ought to conform or be sensitive to psychological research. Driving the situationist critique is the thesis that, because virtue ethics places its evaluative focus upon an agent's psychology and puts forward as its normative ideal a specific form of psychology and agency more generally, it ought to be working with an understanding of psychology that, to some extent at least, reflects how people actually behave. This general idea represents a commitment to psychological realism.

Psychological realism maintains that normative theorizing ought to be constrained by an empirically adequate picture of human nature. Flanagan (1991) was among the first philosophers to introduce psychological realism as a formal constraint. His version, which he describes as minimal psychological realism, holds that moral theories and ideals must invoke an understanding of agency that is possible or perceived to be possible for ordinary people. Worried that this constraint does not go far enough, I defend a stronger form of psychological realism, which I call moderate psychological realism (Besser-Jones 2014). Moderate psychological realism holds that moral theories and ideals must be based upon a psychologically informed account of what can be reasonably expected of people.

The degree to which one is sympathetic to some form of psychological realism likely has much to do with what one takes to be the most important aims of normative theory. If one takes the most important aim of normative theory to be a largely theoretical one, of reflecting and understanding the best form humanity can take, then psychological realism seems much less important. If, in contrast, one takes the most important aim of normative theory to be a practical one, aimed at developing ideals that ordinary people can attain, and formulating guidelines that will help them do it, then one is likely to be more sympathetic to psychological realism.

Conclusion

The situationist critique of virtue ethics marks an important juncture for the field. In challenging the Aristotelian framework that dominates much of the field, it forces virtue ethicists to think through the basis of their core commitments. As this chapter has shown, the situationist critique encourages virtue ethicists to think through the role of behavior within their theories, to consider the degree to which possession of virtue requires certain behaviors, and to come to terms with whether or not an individual's virtue really can be read off from her behavior. It also encourages virtue ethicists to think about what the virtues themselves are, to think about how robust the virtues need to be (or not), to think about whether they can be possessed in degrees and to think about whether or not virtue ethics can do away with understanding the virtues as discrete traits and begin to think about character and virtue holistically. Finally and perhaps most fundamentally, the situationist critique encourages virtue ethicists to reflect upon the very aims of their normative inquiries and upon what the implications these aims have for the degree of psychological realism to which they ought to be committed.

Related Topics

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