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IS VIRTUE A VIRTUAL IMPOSSIBILITY?
SITUATIONISM'S CHALLENGE TO VIRTUE ETHICS AND IMPLICATIONS
FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION

NUNZIATO

Is Virtue a Virtual Impossibility?
Situationism's Challenge to Virtue Ethics and Implications for Spiritual Formation

by
Josiah Nunziato

Dedicated in
loving memory to
Dan Hurley

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Major Honors in the
Departments of Psychology and Philosophy

Houghton College, Houghton, New York
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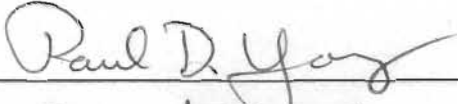
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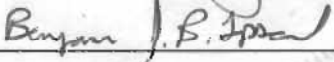
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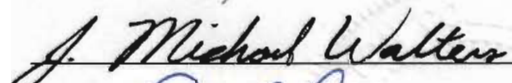
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This project has only emerged as a product of the patient teaching, counseling, and advising of numerous professors at Houghton College, who have profoundly assisted in forming me into a person who could address an interdisciplinary project of this scope. I owe significant thanks to Professor Ben Lipscomb for eagerly assisting in selecting a topic and co-advising this thesis. To Professor Paul Young I am indebted for co-advising my thesis and helping maintain my love for psychology. I owe Professor Jon Case great gratitude for his friendship and role in instilling in me the importance of Trinitarian, Christocentric theology, centered in the life of the Church. I am grateful to Professor Miko Walters for advising my investigation of spiritual formation and for encouraging me to pursue this project.

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Dedicated in loving memory to Dan Hurley, Franciscan friar, fellow philosopher, visionary, and friend.

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that will prove important to understanding and critically evaluating the later psychological conversation.

The second chapter will begin with an explanation of the central issues of the debate between situationist social psychology and dispositionalist personality psychology.

Introduction

This project engages a conversation with an extensive history. Philosophers have, for several thousand years, considered and modified Aristotle's virtue ethics. Dispositionists and situationists in the psychological literature have fiercely argued over the power of environmental and characterological factors for the last forty years. A nearly twenty-year span of investigation has been devoted to exploring the implications of situationism for virtue ethics. Christian spiritual formation has been ongoing, since Christ's incarnation. My work in this project is an effort to make more explicit some old connections and to formulate some new associations and conclusions of my own, recognizing that I enter an extremely complex dialogue with many opinions already represented.

An abbreviated summary of what will come in the following pages can be expressed in the following statement: I will investigate what situationist experimental psychology can contribute to a contemporary appropriation of virtue ethics and how Christian spiritual formation can benefit from that dialogue.

In the first chapter, I will introduce Aristotle's approach to ethics, providing an introduction to his thought that does not require extensive background in ethical theory. This explanation will be followed subsequently by explanation of modern appropriations of Aristotle's ethics by Alasdair Macintyre and Rosalind Hursthouse. Throughout the first chapter, I will intentionally emphasize elements of their theories

that will prove important to understanding and critically evaluating the later psychological conversation.

The second chapter will begin with an explanation of the central issues of the debate between situationist social psychologists and dispositionist personality psychologists. Following the general discussion, several sections are devoted to explaining classic psychological experiments that demonstrate important aspects of the situationist criticism. Having provided a representative understanding of situationism, the next part of chapter two will explore the approaches of John Doris, Owen Flanagan, Gilbert Harman, and Kwame Anthony Appiah to applying the insights of situationism to virtue ethics.

In the third chapter, I will present contemporary conclusions of the situationism controversy, followed by explanation of how virtue ethicists might go about mounting a response to the claims levied against it by experimental psychology. Such a response is then applied in the context of a famous social psychological experiment that has proven archetypical of situationist research. Having explained how virtue ethics might hold together under the pressure of situationist criticisms, I will proceed to explain what benefits virtue ethics might gain from attending to situationism.

Finally, in the fourth chapter, I will draw a connection between virtue ethics and contemporary approaches to Christian spiritual formation, concluding with some implications that situationism might offer to improve spiritual formation. Before beginning investigation of the above-outlined issues, I should draw some attention to the scope of this project. Due to the inter-disciplinary nature of the project and the scope of each of the conversations engaged, space constraints necessitate attention only

to particular aspects of each of the major conversations relevant to the project. For this reason, many implications and potential extensions of the concepts outlined here will remain unexplored. One advantage of the breadth of the conversation this project engages is that it leaves considerable room for experimental psychology to test some of my own conclusions. The project also allows for extension of the implications of situationism for both virtue ethics and situationism. I hope, though, to attend adequately to the nuances of these conversations in a way intelligible to those largely unfamiliar with these concepts, while still providing enough depth to stimulate further thought and research for those more experienced with the relevant topics in philosophy, psychology, and theology. Having grasped the overall trajectory for the project, you will be better equipped for now commencing engagement with these issues.

Aristotle's ethical writings have been read, debated, lived, appropriated, criticized and modified for the last 2,300 years. Aristotle's own conception of ethics emerged from evaluating, adapting, criticizing, and ultimately rejecting many of the philosophical doctrines of Socrates and of Aristotle's own mentor, Plato. In addition to his lasting work in formulating the first systematic formulation of logic, one of Aristotle's most significant contributions to contemporary philosophical conversation is his conceptualization of virtue ethics. A renewed interest in virtue ethics has occurred primarily due to contemporary appropriation of Aristotle's theory by scholars such as G. E. M. Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Michael Doore, in addition to MacIntyre and Hursthouse. In this section, I will first summarize and critically present the essential elements of Aristotle's theory of virtue. I will then proceed to explain how later writers have appropriated Aristotle, taking MacIntyre and Hursthouse as representatives of viable Neo-Aristotelian approach to virtue ethics.

Aristotle's theoretical commitments are frequently explicated by placing them in opposition or tension with two other primary deontology. Consequentialism's most prominent form is utilitarianism, as formulated by such proponents as Jeremy Bentham and J. S. Mill. Utilitarianism is generally predicated on a commitment to maximizing goods produced in any situation. Moral action is guided by determining which actions will maximize the goods in a particular

situation. While utilitarians have often offered pleasure as the good to be maximized, other goods (such as happiness) may be chosen for maximization. Utilitarianism is ordinarily conceived of as concerning on the results, or consequences, of moral

Chapter 1: Virtue Ethics

A Brief Introduction to Virtue

In contrast to focusing on the results of action, deontology, as most prominently presented in Kantian and Neo-Kantian forms, is often explained as focusing on the nature of the act itself. For this reason, deontology is described as rule-based, calling for ethical decisions to be made as reason cooperates with the will to ensure obedience to the moral law. These rudimentary descriptions of consequentialist and deontological approaches to ethics contrast with a general explanation of virtue ethics, which is said to focus on the agent, rather than the agent's acts (as in deontology) or the result of the agent's activities (as in consequentialism). Virtue ethics concentrates on cultivating the agent's character, claiming that action proceeds from a person's settled dispositions and that focusing on encouraging virtuous character can thus best facilitate moral action. These general descriptions provide a general way of understanding the relation between elements of Aristotle's theory of virtue. I will then proceed to explain how later writers have appropriated Aristotle, taking MacIntyre and Hursthouse as representatives of a viable Neo-Aristotelian approach to virtue ethics.

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beauty—marks our blessedness. For we do not altogether have the character of

theoretical commitments of virtue ethics, which will occupy the remainder of the chapter.

Aristotle: Virtue Born

For Aristotle, the central concept for ethical reflection is *areté* or *virtue*.

Aristotle is committed to the notion that each person and thing is striving toward its unique *telos*, or *end*, and the virtues are character structures that help people live a life in accord with their proper functions, propelling them toward their *telos*. For rational beings, the *telos* toward which all people strive is *eudaimonia*, which (probably misleadingly) has frequently been translated as “happiness.” Instead of understanding *eudaimonia* as “happiness,” we might more correctly understand it as referring to a state of human flourishing (or fittingness), in which humans appropriately fulfill their particular roles.

Thus, the virtuous life will usually lead to *eudaimonia*, a state of human flourishing. Aristotle (trans. 1999) comments “Happiness [*eudaimonia*] is a certain sort of activity of the soul in accord with complete virtue” (1102a5-6). According to Aristotle, virtue and happiness are intimately linked, such that the person who seeks *eudaimonia*, the well-lived life, will do so by attempting to cultivate virtuous dispositions. Yet, virtue is not the only condition for achieving *eudaimonia*. On Aristotle’s account, certain “external goods” are also necessary for *eudaimonia* (1099a30-32). Aristotle explains the importance of external goods in the following manner:

Deprivation of certain [externals]—for instance, good birth, good children, beauty—mars our blessedness. For we do not altogether have the character of

happiness if we look utterly repulsive or are ill-born, solitary or childless; and we have it even less, presumably, if our children or friends are totally bad, or were good but have died...Happiness would seem to need this sort of prosperity added also. (1099b2-8)

Because both virtue and external goods are necessary to achieve *eudaimonia*, not every virtuous person will attain *eudaimonia*, due to the unpredictable control of fate over one's external goods. For instance, a virtuous person might be struck by the ruinous effects of a natural disaster, destroying her prosperity and, with it, her possibility of attaining *eudaimonia* (Aristotle, 1100a5-11). Thus, virtue is required for achieving the good life for humans, yet *eudaimonia* also depends on the presence of some external factors favorable to the agent's wellbeing.

Having grasped the connection between the fitting life (*eudaimonia*) and virtue, we can understand what, on Aristotle's account, constitutes a virtue. Aristotle conceives of the virtues not as actions themselves or as passing propensities to perform certain types of actions. Instead, the virtues are dispositions that are deeply instilled in a person by repeated practice, learning, and entrainment. Aristotle, in one section, describes virtue's role in human life in the following way: "The virtue of a human being will...be the state that makes a human being good and makes him perform his function well" (1106a22-24). Furthermore, the virtues may be fundamentally separated into two varieties: virtues of thought and virtues of character, and each of these types of virtue is inculcated in agents through different means. Aristotle contends, "Virtue of thought arises and grows mostly from teaching; that is why it needs experience and time. Virtue of character results from habit...Hence it is also clear that none of the virtues of

character arises in us naturally” (1103a15-19). Both virtue of thought and virtue of character are important components of a virtuous character, yet it is clear that for Aristotle, virtues become part of a person’s character primarily by habit (1104a34-1104b4). Mere teaching from other virtuous agents is not sufficient to transform others into people with virtuous character, but repeatedly doing virtuous actions will form the propensity, or habit, of acting in similarly appropriate ways in future situations. Thus through the training of the habits, virtuous dispositions are implanted in individual moral agents. In fact, Aristotle likens the fostering of virtuous dispositions to the process of practice that workpeople underwent to cultivate virtuosity in particular skills necessary for their own trade. For this reason, Aristotle understood the virtues to be entrained by repeated action, saying, “We become builders, for instance, by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions” (1103a33-1103b2). Thus, while instruction is useful in cultivating intellectual virtues that help a person act virtuously, the virtues become part of a person’s character by repetition of appropriate actions. Appropriate action is constituted by virtuous responses to particular circumstances. Habituation thus aims at the appropriation of virtuous character and the reasons that lead to virtuous action.

Next, it will be important to describe more exactly what sorts of things the virtues actually are, and what sorts of activities foster their development. Aristotle’s theory of virtue is formed by his experiential observation that “these sorts of states naturally tend to be ruined by excess and deficiency. We see this happen with strength and health...for both excessive and deficient exercise ruins health, whereas the

proportionate amount produces, increases, and preserves it" (1104a13-19). The observation that extremes in action tend to produce inappropriate results leads Aristotle to conceive of the virtues as the mean between two extremes, such that virtues and vices do not differ in *kind*, but rather in *scale* or *degree*. A vice is thus a disposition that has been improperly formed, such that it produces incorrect action when in disposition-relevant conditions. A virtue is not of a different type from that of the vice; instead, it has merely been formed in such a way that it produces proper action in conditions that elicit a response from that disposition. Thus, Aristotle contends that "actions are called just or temperate when they are the sort that a just or temperate person would do" (1105b7-8). The morality of action is understood to be anchored in the character of the agent who would enact them, resulting in a list of specific virtues and their bookending vices. Aristotle's list of virtues includes bravery, temperance, generosity, magnificence, magnanimity, a nameless intermediate between being honor-loving and indifferent to honor, mildness, truthfulness, wit, friendliness, proneness to shame, and proper indignation. A concrete instance of the virtues as golden means between vices is exemplified by truthfulness being the mean between boastfulness and self-deprecation (1107b1-1108b10). Of course this list of virtues is particular to Aristotle. Other theorists have postulated various specific contents for the virtues, but agreement on particular virtues is of peripheral concern in the present consideration, compared to the ways that various ethicists have conceptualized the virtues and the ways they are formed.

The important point, then, is that Aristotle advocates formation of moral agents through inculcation of particular dispositions (the virtues) through repeated habit, which

will cause agents to produce proper, situationally-appropriate actions in a broad array of circumstances. While such formation of virtuous dispositions might seem deceptively simple, Aristotle affirms that the life of virtue is extremely difficult to attain, partially because of the complexity of determining exactly what the virtuous mean is when particular circumstances require the virtuous agent to act. Aristotle puts it this way, "Presumably this [reaching the intermediate condition] is difficult, especially in particular cases, since it is not easy to define the way we should be angry, with whom, about what, for how long" (1109b14-16). The section illustrates a two points of considerable importance. First, virtue is extremely difficult and few people actually attain the virtuous life. Second, external circumstances partially dictate the sort of action that a virtuous disposition will produce, since a moral agent must respond virtuously to the particular details of his situation. Thus, virtue is context-sensitive.

Aristotle additionally cautions that mere production of proper action is not enough to prove virtuous character. Three additional qualifications must be met to constitute virtue: "First, he must know [that he is doing virtuous actions]; second, he must decide on them, and decide on them for themselves; and, third, he must also do them from a firm and unchanging state" (1105a31-35). Aristotle's psychology of virtuous action includes that virtuous action must be done willingly and not from ignorance, accident, or coincidence. Instead, virtuous activity must proceed from a virtuous disposition. Although such virtue is by nature a middle point between extremes of vice, the virtuous action is not a mean in relation to the goodness of the action. A virtuous disposition will result in the best action, in the context of specific circumstances (1107a7-9).

In addition to the difficult cognitive demands of acting virtuously, a further reason that being virtuous is such a limited vocation is that the number of external goods required for virtuous activity is directly proportional to the greatness of the virtuous activity sought. More external goods are required for more virtuous actions (Aristotle, 1178b2-4). One of the Aristotle's virtues, magnificence, even requires some degree of wealth to possess. Aristotle claims, "A poor person could not be magnificent; he lacks the means for large and fitting expenditures" (1122b28-29). Thus, both *eudaimonia* and virtue depend on external goods, although Aristotle does clarify that considerable external goods are not necessary for virtuous action. Even the poor person can hope to act with considerable virtue. To this end he claims, "We can do fine actions even if we do not rule earth and sea; for even from moderate resources we can do the actions that accord with virtue" (1179a4-6). Therefore, in Aristotle's conception, only those well equipped with external goods will be able to become virtuous, although those who lack such external goods will be able to approximate such virtue.

An additional requirement for the virtuous person is that she possess prudence, or what is more commonly known as practical wisdom. Aristotle thinks that people cannot be virtuous without the ability to discern contingencies by exercise of *phronesis* or "practical wisdom." Aristotle understands practical wisdom as being marked by "deliberating well" (1141b11-12), saying that "prudence is inseparable from virtue of character, and virtue of character from prudence. For the principles of prudence accord with the virtues of character; and correctness in virtues of character accords with prudence" (1178a17-20). Virtue of character and prudence (or "practical wisdom") are inseparable to the point that "full virtue cannot be acquired without prudence"

(1144b17). Such strong commitment to the importance of prudence makes sense in the context of Aristotle's vision of ethics as motivated by the production of a certain sort of person, rather than merely right action. Prudence is the attribute that binds the virtues together and allows them to be properly enacted.

While Aristotle conceives of virtuous *dispositions* as constant, he recognizes that these dispositions will produce different actions, depending on the situation. Since it is difficult to know how to enact the virtues in particular circumstances that contain complex interpersonal and situational variables, practical wisdom is necessary to discern situational factors and to enable the virtuous person to act appropriately in response to the ever-changing situational landscape.

Having explained the characteristics important for the life of virtue—virtuous character, external goods, and prudence—it is necessary to consider the ways in which virtue is actually acquired. Aristotle thinks that people may be taught virtuous activity to a limited extent, but intellectual instruction alone cannot make people virtuous. The practical problem with relying only on academic learning to train the virtues is that such learning may contribute to abstract knowledge that is never converted into virtuous action. A person is not virtuous if he merely knows all about the virtues but never actually uses that knowledge to act virtuously (1179b1-4). People more experienced in virtuous activity may be able to instruct others in virtue and provide assistance to those less experienced in determining what constitutes virtuous activity in specific circumstances, but they cannot, through teaching alone, cause virtue to become incorporated into the character of particular agents. Virtue must be developed through a

combination of learning from moral exemplars and habituation of actions that a virtuous person would do through personal practice.

In addition to gaining moral knowledge and cultivating character through habit formation, proper upbringing from an early age is important in Aristotle's conception of the virtuous agent. Aristotle thinks that pleasure and pain are instrumental in guiding action, and he indicates that education can be used to train people to possess different perceptions about the pleasure of particular acts. Accordingly, Aristotle claims:

Pleasure causes us to do base actions, and pain causes us to abstain from right ones. That is why we need to have had the appropriate upbringing—right from early youth...—to make us find enjoyment or pain in the right things. (Aristotle, 1104b11-13)

For Aristotle, there is hope that a person's perceptions may be trained to attribute pain and pleasure to the proper objects, and in such a way, virtuous dispositions may be inculcated. Attention to training and habituation from an early age further demonstrates Aristotle's commitment to ethical action proceeding from the character of the virtuous agent. Training from youth will have a better chance of properly instilling virtuous character through the training of perception.

An important component of this training in virtue occurs in the context of the community of the aspiring virtuous agent. By recognizing that training is the responsibility of others outside the family, Aristotle comes to understand a close relationship between ethics and politics, for laws have an important role in regulating actions in accord with virtue (1180a7-11). Aristotle thus contends, "It is best, then, if the community attends to upbringing, and attends correctly. But if the community

neglects it, it seems fitting for each individual to promote the virtue of his children and his friends” (1180a30-32). Thus, training in virtue happens on several levels: that of the family and early childhood education, that of individual advice from moral exemplars, and that of direction from lawmakers, politicians, and educators on a social and communal level.

From all of this, we may summarize a few important points about virtue in the following manner. Aristotle claims that “The happy life seems to be a life in accord with virtue, which is a life involving serious actions, and not consisting in amusement” (1177a1-2). The virtuous life, given a certain degree of external goods, will lead to a state of *eudaimonia*, human flourishing. To be virtuous is not merely to perform the right sorts of actions. Rather, the virtuous agent possesses a virtuous character and practical wisdom, from which right action proceeds. Such virtuous dispositions are inculcated by a combination of direct education from those more experienced in virtue, formation of character through habit, early upbringing that trains the person to take pleasure and pain in the appropriate objects, and guidance from laws. Primarily, though, Aristotle stresses that virtue is learned and reinforced by repeated activity that approximates desired actions. Such habituation forms the character of the agent to act and react in the ways that a virtuous person would. Finally, external goods are necessary to allow for fully virtuous action, although a person may be virtuous without possessing large quantities of material possessions. Such an understanding of virtue ethics demonstrates that Aristotle argues that moral education should focus on character formation of virtuous agents so that they will be able to live well in the world and attain *eudaimonia*.

Alasdair MacIntyre: Virtue Reintroduced

With the publication of *After Virtue* in 1984, sociologist and philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre brought Aristotelian virtue ethics back to a prominent position in ethical reflection. Although Anscombe and Foot had published work on virtue ethics in 1958 and 1978 respectively, Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics seems to have come to the fore of ethical discourse with the publishing of MacIntyre's work. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre combines a compelling account of virtue and narrative that is both sociologically and philosophically acute. MacIntyre will function as the first of two representative figures for the contemporary renaissance of interest in virtue ethics, with Rosalind Hursthouse being the second representative. This section will outline basic contours of the ethical vision that MacIntyre presents, emphasizing areas of similarity and difference from Aristotle's account of virtue.

MacIntyre, in his first chapter sets up the basic premise for much of the remainder of the work: during the Enlightenment, humanity was severed from any concept of an end or *telos* (as Aristotle conceived of it). This severing of the project of ethics from any *telos* proper to humanity left ethicists trying to do the project of ethics in an unintelligible and incomplete manner (p. 55). MacIntyre argues that by reintroducing three elements into ethical deliberation, ethics will be able to regain its footing. He describes the relation of the three elements in the following manner:

We thus have a threefold scheme in which human-nature-as-it-happens-to-be (human nature in its untutored state) is initially discrepant and discordant with the precepts of ethics and needs to be transformed by the instruction of practical reason and experience into human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos*.

Each of the three elements of the scheme—the conception of untutored human nature, the conception of the precepts of rational ethics and the conception of human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos*—requires reference to the other two if its status and function are to be intelligible. (p. 53)

MacIntyre contends that each of these three concepts must be present in ethical deliberation to allow coherently theorizing about ethics. MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment severed “human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos*” from the other two concepts when it discarded Aristotle’s conception of an end appropriate to rational human agents. This schism left ethicists with “a set of injunctions deprived of their teleological context” (p. 55). MacIntyre thinks that reintroducing a teleological conception of human nature will allow for ethics to make sense of moral convictions that were previously unintelligible.

Following Aristotle, MacIntyre relies on the concept of a particular end or *telos* that is particular to humans, recognizing that “The good is defined in terms of [humans’] specific characteristics” (p. 148). This *telos* is, as for Aristotle, found in the concept of *eudaimonia*, which MacIntyre defines as “the state of being well and doing well in being well, of a man’s being well-favored himself and in relation to the divine” (p. 148). Given the context of an end proper to humanity, which is a certain sort of life-well-lived, MacIntyre claims that “The virtues are precisely those qualities the possession of which will enable an individual to achieve *eudaimonia* and the lack of which will frustrate his movement toward that *telos*” (p. 148). This conception of virtue is supplemented by a familiar inclusion of practical wisdom in ethical decision-making, in order to be able “to do the right thing in the right place at the right time in the right

way” (p. 150). Thus, MacIntyre explains the concepts of a *telos*, *eudaimonia*, and virtue in largely orthodox Aristotelian fashion.

One important adaptation of Aristotle’s approach to virtue is MacIntyre’s explanation of virtues as occurring in particular spheres of influence, which MacIntyre dubs “practices.” MacIntyre defines a practice as:

Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity. (p. 187)

The virtues properly occur within these socially defined practices. The virtues are primarily defined vis-à-vis particular practices and they allow a person to achieve the ends uniquely defined by a practice (MacIntyre, p. 191). In contrast, Aristotle thinks that there is simply one sort of life that is best for all rational beings. MacIntyre’s sociological adaptation of Aristotle’s theory modernizes it to allow for various, yet equally good, forms of life to occur in the contexts of different practices.

Because virtue is largely defined by “those goods which are internal to practices,” MacIntyre is not pressed to define a list of particular virtues (p. 191).

Instead, he recognizes that “What we find generally pleasant or useful will depend on what virtues are generally possessed and cultivated in our community” (p. 160). In this statement, there are certainly resonances of Aristotle’s belief that parents should teach children to find pleasure and pain in the proper objects. Yet, MacIntyre expresses this cultivation of perception in a more relativistic way than Aristotle does. In MacIntyre’s perspective, there may be some difference of what virtues are accepted in differing

societies. Because he understands the virtues to be dictated largely by particular communities, MacIntyre agrees with Aristotle that a significant part of training in virtue consists of being taught by society, laws, or one's parents to take pleasure and pain in appropriate objects. Such training aims at cultivating dispositions that will enable virtuous action. MacIntyre claims, "The education of the passions into conformity with pursuit of what theoretical reasoning identifies as the *telos* and practical reasoning as the right action to do in each particular time and place is what ethics is all about" (p. 162). This dense explanation of ethics reveals three important elements of MacIntyre's theory. First, the passions are plastic enough to be trained to facilitate virtue. Second, both theoretical reason and practical reasoning about situations guide ethical deliberation. Third, ethical deliberation must be attentive to the particularities of situations to guide virtuous action. Therefore, both Aristotle and MacIntyre focus on the training of character, which allows the attainment of a person's *telos*, *eudaimonia* (p. 148).

Although MacIntyre's version of virtue ethics is thus very much in continuity with Aristotle's, perhaps the biggest difference emerges out of MacIntyre's sociological commitments. He wants to understand the virtues, not merely as happening in some sort of global context but as embedded in practices and traditions. MacIntyre thinks that this modification maintains continuity with Aristotle's theory, while allowing for significant development of the theory in terms of narrative. One of MacIntyre's most important contributions to virtue theory is the way he understands virtue as occurring in the context of extended narratives. MacIntyre explains the connection between virtue and narrative in the following manner:

The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. Quests sometime fail, are frustrated, abandoned or dissipated into distractions; and human lives may in all these ways also fail. But the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest. (p. 219)

MacIntyre wants to understand virtue as narratively embedded in particular people as they are formed by their families, societies, and governments. Virtue, as it is inculcated in people, causes them to be brought into a unity that accords with the narrative in which they are implanted. MacIntyre thinks it a misguided endeavor to try to understand a person's life without reference to the narrative which that person uses to make sense of their existence in the world. Because of this commitment, MacIntyre can also claim:

The story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualistic mode, is to deform my present relationships. The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide. (p. 212)

Thus, each person is a product of her historical and social context in such an integral manner that she cannot become truly virtuous without concrete reference to her situatedness.

MacIntyre's attention to particular circumstances, histories, and narratives finds resonances with Aristotle's understanding of virtuous people as the product of their early education and the political community of the *polis*. MacIntyre thus effectively

usher's Aristotle's basic ethical commitments into the 1980s, while incorporating a sociological perspective of virtue. The virtues themselves remain largely faithful to Aristotle's conception, but the way they are embedded in human lives and practices and the manner in which they lead to *eudaimonia* differs somewhat from Aristotle's understanding. While Aristotle conceives of one universal way of striving for *eudaimonia*, MacIntyre argues that *eudaimonia* may be pursued in many different ways that accord with the unique goals of particular practices and human narratives.

Rosalind Hursthouse: Contemporary Virtue

In continuity with MacIntyre's project of rejuvenating Aristotle's approach to ethics, Rosalind Hursthouse (1999) presents a version of virtue ethics motivated, in large part, by a desire to show that virtue ethics can offer some guidance for how moral agents should act. This emphasis responds to the common stereotype that virtue ethics focuses *only* on the agent, without attending to moral *action* itself. Hursthouse promotes a Neo-Aristotelian ethical theory that largely accepts Aristotle's understanding of virtuous dispositions and the importance of practical wisdom in acting virtuously. At the same time, she rejects objectionable aspects of his theoretical commitments (including his disparaging view of women and slaves and his particular list of the virtues) (p. 8). Like MacIntyre, Hursthouse tries to modernize Aristotle's ethics to address more directly the demands of contemporary culture and its academic concerns. Because Aristotle's theory was an exposition of general rules in ethics, he was not generally concerned with particular scenarios, yet the current experimental climate is interested in verifying particular applications of Aristotle's theory about which he did not provide direct guidance. Hursthouse, with self-awareness, admits that:

There are all sorts of specific areas that come up in contemporary moral philosophy about which Aristotle said little or nothing. When this happens, the neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicist has to launch out on her own, perhaps, as often in my case, feeling that she is pursuing a line of thought which is a natural development of his; or perhaps self-consciously moving away from him. (p. 9)

While leaving room for divergence in specific cases not covered by Aristotle's general perspective on ethics, Hursthouse maintains considerable continuity with Aristotle's actual theory of virtue. In explaining virtue, Hursthouse claims that "a virtue is generally held to be a character trait, a state of one's character" (p. 11). Like Aristotle and MacIntyre, Hursthouse conceives of the virtues as dispositions, or traits, that inhere in moral agents, producing consistently appropriate action.

An important consideration for Hursthouse is how virtue inheres in particular moral agents. She comments that "Once acquired, they [virtues and vices] are strongly entrenched, precisely because they involve so much more than mere tendencies to act in certain ways. A change in such character traits is a profound change, one that goes... 'all the way down'" (p. 12). Virtue, then, for Hursthouse, profoundly affects the entire composition of one's character, an understanding reflected in both Aristotle's and MacIntyre's understanding of virtue's relation to character. Thus, virtues are not merely peripheral or ancillary traits that may be casually adopted on particular occasions. Being virtuous requires holistic commitment of the entire person. A person will only be considered virtuous if she possesses the corresponding virtues in the form of "character traits" (p. 29). Hursthouse's description of the virtues as traits certainly indicates the degree to which Hursthouse has been affected by a culture of psychology.

At the same time, description of the virtues as character traits indicates that she understands the virtues as integrated into the fabric of the agent's personality. Virtue invites the radical training of one's character in virtue, such that the whole person is brought into alignment with virtue. Thus, Hursthouse explains that "the virtuous agent, when she acts virtuously, acts from virtue, from the relevant character trait which includes practical wisdom" (p. 145). Virtue, just as for Aristotle is formed in the character and is necessarily linked with practical wisdom.

Such holistic alignment of character must be linked with practical wisdom in such a way that the virtuous agent knows what sort of action to perform, how to perform it, when to perform it, and toward whom (see Aristotle, 1106b17-24).

Hursthouse agrees with Aristotle on the importance of practical wisdom, claiming, "Each of the virtues involves getting things right, for each involves *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which is the ability to reason correctly about practical matters" (p. 12). The combination of the intellectual virtues, virtues of character, and practical wisdom allows a person to be "a morally good, excellent, or admirable person who acts and reacts well, rightly, as she should—she gets things right" (p. 13). The combination of these three attributes allows the virtuous agent to know how a virtuous person would act in particular circumstances and to herself act accordingly.

Like MacIntyre, Hursthouse is not concerned with delineating a particular list of which dispositions or traits count as virtues, but she is particularly interested with the process of moral education (p. 32). Hursthouse thinks that the activities of a virtuous person can be understood, even if one has not yet learned what precisely it means to be a virtuous person. Hursthouse takes her cue from children, who seem able to perform

specific virtuous actions, despite not yet having the ability to form themselves into agents who possess virtuous character through years of habituation in cooperation with the proper external goods (p. 80). The fact that children can perform actions that accord with virtue allows parents to begin the process of character formation advocated by Aristotle. From an early age, parents ought to be training their children to take pleasure and pain in the proper objects. Hursthouse recognizes the importance of training the perceptions, warning, “If I have the wrong conception of what is worthwhile, advantageous, or pleasant, then I shall have the wrong conception of what is good for, and harmful to, myself and others” (p. 82). Childhood education must carefully attend to inculcating appropriate values for these judgments.

As one moves out of childhood, Hursthouse claims that training in virtue continues the process of internalizing the reasons for virtuous actions that culminate in virtuous dispositions. This process of repeated actions to inculcate virtuous dispositions in people happens over a person’s lifetime. According to Hursthouse:

Moral knowledge, unlike mathematical knowledge, cannot be acquired merely by attending lectures, and is not characteristically to be found in people too young to have much experience of life. We do not think of moral or practical wisdom—of knowledge of what one should do—as easily come by, as something that an adolescent is likely to have. (p. 59)

As part of this training in virtuous actions that ideally culminate in virtuous dispositions, a person ought to seek the advice of other people that one knows to be virtuous. Hursthouse, like Aristotle, recommends that since a person’s action ought to be guided by determining how a virtuous agent would perform in her position, it makes

sense to consult another person more virtuous than oneself (p. 35). Such counsel may allow for direct advice on what constitutes virtuous action in specific circumstances. Particularly if a person is older, he will likely have had more experience learning to do virtuous actions in many different contexts. Advice about particular actions may be instrumental in forming one's own character progressively more into the sort that a virtuous person would possess.

In concluding this overview of Hursthouse's account of virtue ethics, it is appropriate to draw particular attention to the way that Hursthouse includes the emotions in the process of character formation. Presumably a sort of training of the emotions is implied by Aristotle's emphasis on teaching children to feel pleasure and pain properly (Aristotle, 1104b11-13), but Hursthouse modernizes Aristotle's approach, claiming, "The whole idea that a human agent could do what she should, in every particular instance, while her emotions are way out of line, is a complete fantasy" (p. 118). Character formation must attempt to form a person completely into a holistically virtuous agent. The importance of forming the emotions is illustrated in situations where another person has suffered a tragedy and the only contribution a virtuous agent can offer is simply to be present with them in their suffering. In such a case, "Such comfort and assuagement as we can offer, as we should, springs solely from our emotional reactions. If we can't come up with the right ones [emotional responses], we fail them [the person suffering], and it is a moral failure" (p. 118). Commitment to forming the emotions in addition to rationality and volition further emphasizes the difficulty of holistic character formation, yet it also presents another important aspect to which attempts at character formation can aim.

Summarizing Virtue

Although some variation exists between proponents of virtue ethics, general agreement forms around a few essential points. First, virtue ethics focuses primarily on the character of moral agents, which are expected to produce proper action. Second, virtue is the means by which humanity achieves its *telos*, which consists of *eudaimonia*. Third, practical wisdom (*phronesis*) must accompany virtuous character for a person to be virtuous. Fourth, practical wisdom provides the ability to recognize situational factors and allow virtuous dispositions to produce behavior appropriate to the context. The role of practical wisdom shows that virtue ethics does attend to situational factors. Fifth, character formation ought to begin from an early age and be accomplished by parents, society, and legal regulation. Sixth, training in virtue must come primarily by habitual practice of virtuous action and cannot be accomplished by instruction alone. These points emphasize a few of the primary concerns of virtue ethics and allow for analytical assessment of the criticisms expressed by situationism, which are presented in the next chapter.

Mischel managed to nearly single-handedly create this schism in the psychological community with his attacks on the validity of then-accepted ideas about the stability of human personality, specifically with reference to the ability of personality traits to predict human behavior. The controversy and the great number of voices that have weighed in on the conversation, numerous different claims have emerged about how radical Mischel's criticisms actually were. Many commentators contest that later researchers exaggerated the actual

claims of Mischel's book, causing the firestorm of controversy about traits and situations to become increasingly explosive. Whether or not Mischel actually advocated such radical changes in psychology's orientation to researching behavior, he certainly

Chapter 2: Situationism and the Challenge to Virtue Ethics

Introduction to the Debate

In 1968, Walter Mischel published his seminal work *Personality and Assessment*, which defined much of the research agenda in social psychology for the next several decades. Over the last forty years, the heated controversy over Mischel's book has continued amongst psychologists, demarcating two distinct ideological factions: social psychology-oriented situationists and personality psychology-oriented dispositionists. The central argument between situationists and dispositionists concerns which factors best allow for the prediction of human behavior. The prototypical social psychologist claims that situational factors of the environments in which humans find themselves more accurately predict patterns of behavior, whereas the prototypical personality psychologist claims that personality traits allow for more accurate prediction of human behavior.

Mischel managed to nearly single-handedly create this schism in the psychological community with his attacks on the validity of then-accepted ideas about the stability of human personality, specifically with reference to the ability of personality traits to predict human behavior. Because of the duration of this controversy and the great number of voices that have weighed in on the conversation, numerous different claims have emerged about how radical Mischel's criticisms actually were. Many commentators contest that later researchers exaggerated the actual

claims of Mischel's book, causing the firestorm of controversy about traits and situations to become increasingly explosive. Whether or not Mischel actually advocated such radical changes in psychology's orientation to researching behavior, he certainly provided the catalyst for a vehement conversation to emerge.

From these introductory comments about the content and nature of the controversy between trait psychologists and dispositionists, it should quickly become apparent how this conversation is critically important for Aristotelian and Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. Traditionally, virtue ethics has relied heavily on the existence of something akin to personality traits, and it has called these human capacities 'virtues.' These virtues are cultivated in humans by habituation and by learning from those who are more completely virtuous than they are. Implicit in virtue ethics is a commitment to the virtues as being, to some extent, stable, at least to the degree that they can be used to predict that a person will act as a virtuous person would in their circumstances. The role of fairly stable traits in guiding the behavior of a virtuous person comes under attack from the situationist criticism that situational factors overwhelm the behavioral relevance of any traits that might inhere in a person. Thus, the conversation between situationists and dispositionists is of considerable importance for assessing the plausibility of virtue ethics. If situationism is radically successful, then the concept of personality traits should be utterly abolished as being of no predictive value for human behavior. If such a conclusion is indeed the outcome for the conversation in psychology, then radical alterations in the way virtue ethics is conceptualized seem required. At its furthest extension, radical situationism would denounce virtue ethics as a psychological impossibility. In this chapter, I will briefly

trace the development of situationism toward its contemporary conclusions. After presenting a brief history of situationism, I will explain four experiments that have frequently been cited to lend credence to situationism. Finally, having gained some familiarity with the experimental support for situationism, the chapter will conclude with four sections, each one devoted to explaining a recent approach to applying the situationism to virtue ethics.

A Brief History of Situationism

One of the reasons that Mischel's work in *Personality and Assessment* created such controversy is that it was seen as an attack on the way that personality psychology had been proceeding for the last several decades. Since the early work of Gordon Allport, and the later work of Raymond Cattell, psychologists had maintained some emphasis on personality traits as viable constructs that were challenging to measure in an experimental context but that actually did exist as elements of human character (despite frequent failures to measure them). Allport's work postulated the existence of "clearly 'real' traits of personality. They [personality traits] designate generalized and personalized determining tendencies—consistent and stable modes of an individual's adjustment to his environment.... These terms do not imply merely temporary and specific behavior" (Allport, 1937, p. 306). According to Allport's assessment in 1937, traits seem to allow prediction of a considerable degree of stability in human behavior both over time and across various situations.

Mischel questioned this past reliance on personality traits as providing a means of assessing and predicting human behavior. Mischel (1968) contends, "Individuals show far less cross-situational consistency in their behavior than has been assumed by

trait-state theories. The more dissimilar the evoking situations, the less likely they are to produce similar or consistent responses from the same individual” (p. 177). Mischel demonstrates his reliance on situation as determining human behavior. He contends that the consistency of situation has a more profound effect on human behavior than does any notion of traits inherent in the person. Mischel believed that trait psychologists had noticed the inability of traits to predict behavior in experiments but that they had tried to explain these failures in terms of deficiencies in observation or sampling. Underneath these failures, a more fundamental problem existed, Mischel claimed. Traits were hypothetical structures that did not have significant experimental verification; it would be more profitable to stop trying to force trait explanations of behavior when there was significant evidence to illustrate the importance of human environments correlating for predicting behavior (Mischel, p. 148; Doris, 2002, p. 24). Mischel thus suggested that reference to situational factors allowed prediction of human behavior, allowing for minimization of the importance of trait factors.

Situationism seems to present significant problems for virtue ethicists, yet these problems have been chronically neglected by philosophers until fairly recently. Doris (2002) and Appiah (2008) both contend that philosophy has inappropriately ignored the contributions that other disciplines have to offer in improving ethical reflection. They believe that psychological contributions have particularly been underestimated (Appiah, pp. 1-2; Doris, p. 3;). Philosophers such as Doris, Appiah, and Flanagan, argue that the way people and situations are constituted should have a profound effect on the sort of ethical prescriptions that are applied to humans. They will argue that *can* and *ought* must be connected. In other words, ethical prescriptions (what ought to be) should be at

least partially determined by the sort of agents that humans are and what they are capable of (what “can” be accomplished). In other words, they see it as problematic that humans might be attempting to live in accord with an ethic that demands far more from humans than their constitutions are capable of allowing them to accomplish.

So far the basic contours of the argument between situationists and dispositionists has emerged, but so far, little attention has been paid to specific studies or experimental data that might disconfirm the trait hypotheses that reigned before Mischel’s provocative criticism in 1968. In this next section, I will briefly consider several pivotal studies used by situationists to show the importance of situational factors in determining behavior. This consideration requires careful interpretation, since no experimental results are self-interpreting. Experimental conclusions are determined by a process of human deliberation and interpretation that is often subject to skewing by the ideological orientation of the experimenters. Thus, the following studies may not always support situationist claims in the ways that are suggested. For now, though, these studies will be considered in terms of the author’s own conclusions and for the purpose of illuminating the objections that situationism presents to trait psychology.

Situationism and the Experimental Data

Of cookies and dimes.

In 1972, Alice Isen and Paula Levin performed two experiments of considerable importance in lending credence to situationist explanations of behavior. Their study (which consisted of the two experiments) focused on how manipulation of mood might affect behavior. They hypothesized that the induction of a positive mood would correlate with increased helping behavior.

In the first part of the experiment, Isen and Levin gave cookies to some subjects and did not give cookies to the others. Following the distribution of cookies to those designated to receive them, one of the experimenters asked each subject participating in the experiment one of two questions. Some of the participants were asked to assist the experimenters in performing a helping role in another experiment. The other participants were asked if they would assist the experimenters in performing a distracting task in another experiment (a task that would be helpful to the experimenters but bothersome to the subjects of the other experiment). Isen and Levin predicted that those who received cookies would be more likely than those not receiving cookies to agree to perform the helping role, while they would also be less inclined than those not receiving cookies to volunteer to perform the role of the unappreciated distracter. Their results confirmed this hypothesis, suggesting that increased helping behavior was induced by the elevated mood induced by the reception of a cookie, since the variable of receiving or not receiving the cookie was the sole manipulation between groups.

An alternate interpretation of the data suggested by Isen and Levin was that some participants were simply more willing to help since they had just benefitted from the experimenter's helping behavior (giving a cookie). To attempt to eliminate this alternate interpretation, Isen and Levin ran a second experiment, in which they attempted to induce a positive mood without direct intervention of a person modeling helping behavior. In this second study, the experimenters planted a dime in the coin return slot of a payphone. Unwitting participants would enter the telephone booth, and some would find the dime in the return slot. When the participant exited the booth, a confederate of the experimenter would drop an armful of papers on the sidewalk in front

of the subject exiting the telephone booth. The experimenters hypothesized that the subjects who found the dime in the coin return slot would be more likely than those who did not find the coin to stop to help the confederate pick up her dropped papers from the pavement.

The results from this study were rather stunning. Of the 25 people in the no dime condition (those who did not find the dime in the coin return slot), only 1 person stopped to help the confederate retrieve her lost papers. In striking contrast, of the 16 people in the dime condition (those who did find the dime), 14 people stopped to help the confederate, demonstrating a massive increase in helping behavior, seemingly caused by the minor situational factor of having had the good fortune to unexpectedly find a dime. Isen and Levin concluded that receiving a cookie or finding a dime in the coin return slot of a payphone could positively affect mood and cause increased helping behavior. Situationists have pointed particularly to the second experiment as an instance in which people's behavior was profoundly influenced by an unobtrusive situational factor that seemed completely unrelated to helping behavior. Proponents of situationism contend that the elevation of mood caused by situational factors overwhelmed any effects that the individual dispositions (or virtues) of the participants might have produced.

Of smoke and emergencies.

In the same year that Mischel published *Personality and Assessment*, Bibb Latane and John Darley (1968) investigated the effects of groups on individual decision-making. They wanted to test the influence of group effects on people's propensity to report emergency situations. Specifically, they wanted to determine if an

effect they dubbed “diffusion of responsibility” could be subjected to further experimental demonstration. This effect they explained as explaining the result that “If an individual is alone when he notices an emergency, he is solely responsible for coping with it. If he believes others are also present, he may feel that his own responsibility for taking action is lessened” (p. 215). Thus, when other people are present, the diffusion of responsibility for reporting emergency conditions should result in less reporting by individuals.

To consider the validity of the concept of diffusion of responsibility, Latane and Darley had participants sit in a waiting room while filling out paperwork. While they waited, smoke was released from a nearby vent, which was meant to signal “an ambiguous but potentially dangerous situation” (p. 217). The experimental manipulation consisted of three groups: in one group, the participant sat in the room alone; in the second group, the participant waited in the presence of two other incommunicative confederates of the experimenter; and in the third group, three participants waited together. The participants’ willingness to report the potential emergency situation was measured by the length of time it took for them to report the potentially dangerous circumstances.

The results of the study corresponded closely to what the experimenters had expected. When the participant was alone, it took a median time of 2 minutes for the participant to report the smoke, and 16 of the 24 participants in this condition reported the smoke before the end of the experiment. When the participant waited with the unperturbed accomplices of the experimenter, only 1 of the 10 participants reported the smoke. Latane and Darley report that “the difference between the response rate of 75% in the alone condition and 10% in the two passive confederates condition is highly

significant” (p. 218). In contrast to the response rates of these two groups, in the three participant condition, only 3 participants out of the 24 in the condition reported the potentially harmful circumstances.

Of significant importance for situationism are the participants’ reports of their reasoning for reporting or not reporting during the experiment. Latane and Darley observed the following:

Despite the obvious and powerful report-inhibiting effect of other bystanders, subjects almost invariably claimed that they had paid little or no attention to the reactions of the other people in the room. Although the presence of other people actually had a strong and pervasive effect on the subjects’ reactions, they were either unaware of this or unwilling to admit it (p. 220).

Thus, a seemingly innocuous situational factor—the presence of other people—in the context of a potentially dangerous situation, reduced the likelihood of the circumstance being reported. Participants’ perception of the circumstances as requiring them to take action was significantly determined by the presence of other observers, thus providing experimental validation of Latane and Darley’s concept of “diffusion of responsibility.”

The disturbing conclusion of their study is that “a victim may be more likely to get help, or an emergency may be more likely to be reported, the fewer people there are available to take action” (p. 221). Situationists emphasize the assessment of Latane and Darley that being in a group of other observers can decrease the likelihood that people will provide help in dangerous circumstances. They contend that group effects (a situational factor) are powerful enough to overwhelm whatever traits of compassion or care individuals may possess.

Of lawnmowers and Samaritans.

Kenneth Mathew, Jr. and Lance Canon, in a 1975 study, investigated the effects of a different factor on helping behavior. They tested their hypothesis that noise levels in a particular environment could alter helping behavior by making people less apt to notice other environmental cues that would signal someone's need for help. They hypothesize that "with noisy environments, individuals may become less aware of relatively subtle cues produced in interpersonal interactions that more clearly define other's meanings, intentions, and behavior" (p. 572). An effect of this reduced awareness of interpersonal cues is that people may develop a certain sort of tunnel vision, focusing on their current goals, which may cause a certain insensitivity of one's behavior to other important cues in the person's social environment. The authors comment, "This implies that persons may become relatively more single-minded in their actions, and in a situation that involves another in need of assistance, less likely to interrupt present activities to perform helping acts" (p. 572). Thus, a seemingly insignificant situational factor such as the level of ambient noise in a particular situation may have profound effects on moral behavior.

In keeping with this theory about the role of noise in narrowing one's field of attention, Mathews and Canon conducted two experiments to test the hypothesis that helping behavior would be inversely related to the amount of noise in an environment. The first experiment was a laboratory study in which three conditions of the experiment were run. As the participants arrived to participate in the experiment, they were told to wait in a room for the experiment to start. In the waiting room, the experimenters manipulated the ambient level of noise. In one condition, the level of noise in the room

was not artificially augmented (approximately 48 decibels). In the second condition, a white noise generator created a low noise condition of 65 decibels. In the third condition, the white noise generator created a high noise condition of 85 decibels. Recall that the experimenters wanted to determine how helping behavior would vary with noise level. For each participant in each of the three conditions, a confederate of the experimenters dropped a stack of books, journals, and papers in front of the participant, and the experimenters observed how many of the participants elected to help the confederate retrieve the papers. In this first experiment, a moderate degree of correlation was found between increased noise and decreased helping behavior.

In the second experiment of the study, the experimenters conducted a study outside the laboratory, in which confederates waited for an unknowing participant to walk up a sidewalk alone. When the participant drew near, a confederate would lift a precariously piled stack of books in a box from the back seat of a parked car, and proceed to drop several of the books in front of the participant walking past. Two manipulations were used. In some of the trials, the confederate toting the books was wearing an arm brace (an environmental cue signaling a special need for assistance) and in the other trials the confederate was not wearing the brace. A further manipulation was the degree of ambient noise. In some of trials, no artificial noise was added to the average of 50 decibels of ambient noise. In the other trials, a high-noise condition was created by the running of a nearby lawnmower without a muffler, creating an environment with about 87 decibels of noise.

The results of the experiment demonstrated that 50% of participants in the ambient noise condition assisted the confederate, but only 12.5% of participants in the

high noise condition assisted the confederate. When the confederate was wearing the cast, 80% of the 20 participants in the ambient noise condition assisted the confederate, but only 15% of the 20 participants in the high noise condition provided assistance to the cast-wearer. This consistent difference correlating with changing ambient noise level seems to show that noise level significantly affects helping behavior, and the results relevant to the cast seem to lend credence to the hypothesis that noise reduces helpfulness by reducing sensitivity to important cues in the environment. Presumably, the higher levels of ambient noise distracted the passersby, preventing them from noticing that the confederate was wearing an arm brace and probably needed assistance. Thus, another situational factor, level of ambient noise, seems to profoundly affect behavior, in a way that is difficult to overcome merely on the strength of a person's traits.

Of electrical shocks and moral weakness.

To further highlight the ethical implications of the results of these situationist studies, it may be helpful to draw attention to Stanley Milgram's often-cited "Behavioral Study of Obedience." In his 1963 study, Milgram shocked the psychological community with the results of his disturbing experiment demonstrating the degree to which people will obey authority, even despite their own standards and moral commitments. In his study, Milgram created a situation in which each participant was seated in front of a panel of lever switches that supposedly served to administer varying levels of electrical shock. The severity of the shocks ranged from 15 to 450 volts, and the switches were labeled from "Slight Shock" to "Severe Shock" (the last two switches read only "XXX.") The participant was instructed to administer shocks of

progressively higher intensity to a learner seated in a separate room whenever the learner gave an incorrect response to questions that the participant was instructed to ask the learner (the “learner” was actually a confederate of the experimenter). The participant was to increase the degree of shock every time the “learner” gave an incorrect answer. Milgram wanted to see how severe of a shock participants would be willing to administer to another person on the simple request of the experimenter.

To provide a benchmark of people’s perceptions of participants’ willingness to comply in such a situation, Milgram polled 14 senior psychology students at Yale University to see how many participants they thought would continue administering shocks all the way to the 450-volt level. Estimates of the number of participants that would administer the maximum shock ranged from 0% to 3%, yet when the experiment was actually run, and participants were firmly requested to continue administering shocks under the experimenter’s guidance and direction, 26 (65%) of the 40 subjects continued administering shocks all the way to the maximum shock of 450 volts. This result is even more shocking when it is explained that the experimenter’s confederate, the “learner,” was instructed to scream and shout for mercy as progressively higher shocks were supposedly administered to him. Despite such obvious indications of pain and injury (and the eventual silence of the “learner,” simulating unconsciousness or death), 65% of participants administered the highest shock, which they presumed to be injurious or deadly to the other person.

In a stunning description, Milgram reports that as participants were administering the shocks, they were visibly disturbed, to the extent that “In a large number of cases the degree of tension reached extremes that are rarely seen in

sociopsychological studies. Subjects were observed to sweat, tremble, stutter, bite their lips, and dig their fingers into their flesh” (p. 375). The important point is that despite obvious indications that participants were deeply troubled by the instructions of the experimenter, they continued administering shocks, even though they expected the likely result of the shocks to be death or severe injury to the learner. This experiment, among the most famous in modern psychological history, shows dramatically how situational factors (in this case an experimenter’s directions) can cause a person to behave in ways that are obviously quite contradictory to the behavior advised by their own judgments. Situationists point out that the situational factors (an experimental context, the experimenter’s presence, and the experimenter’s instructions) easily overpowered whatever traits of compassion, kindness, helpfulness and even moral decency and basic civility that participants might have possessed.

Experimental conclusions.

The first three studies surveyed in this section demonstrate the profound effects that situational factors can have on human behavior. Several important factors are common to these experimental studies. The environmental factors—cookies, dimes, other people, and environmental noise—seem to have little direct connection to the helping behaviors being tested. Despite the seeming unimportance of these situational factors in the experimental contexts, such factors seem to have extensive effects on behavior. The Milgram study differs from the other three experiments in that it uses a more significant and directly related environmental factor—an experimenter’s instructions—to change participant’s behavior. This study is most notable for demonstrating the obvious overpowering of participants’ better judgments in a case, not

of helping behavior, but of administering bodily harm. Situationists have taken these studies to argue that situational factors easily overpower personality traits in situations of extreme ethical importance.

Having considered representative studies of primary importance to the claims of situationism, it is now possible to consider more directly the threat that contemporary situationism poses to virtue ethics. To provide a more detailed explanation of the situationist criticism of virtue ethics, I will take John Doris primarily as a representative figure. A lengthy exploration of his perspective will be followed by shorter sections that explain the alternative views of Owen Flanagan, Gilbert Harman, and Kwame Anthony Appiah. These perspectives provide preparation to understand the possible responses of virtue ethics to situationism that will be presented at the beginning of the next chapter.

Virtue Ethics Criticized by Situationists

John Doris.

John Doris's work is motivated by his belief that attention to the findings of experimental psychology about the inadequacy of trait psychology may provide pragmatic benefits, allowing philosophers to "do better in ethics" (Doris, 2002, p. ix). According to Doris, ethical reflection ought to be attentive to the realities of human life. When ethics becomes sequestered into a purely academic exercise that does not account for the complexity and diversity of human experience, he thinks that it fails (p. 1). To confirm the human propensity to understand ethics in terms of character assessment, Doris points to the rich linguistic resources present in the English language to express the notion that "good character inoculates against shifting fortune" (p. 1). In Western

cultures, people are usually trained to think that character is powerful enough to withstand the negligible effects of changing environments, yet Doris thinks that this intuition is considerably misguided. Attention to psychology may allow for a correction of this incorrect judgment.

Doris helpfully explains his understanding of situationism's contribution by recommending that "Situationism's fundamental observation can...be stated plainly enough: behavior is...extraordinarily sensitive to variation in circumstances" (p. 2). In fact, Doris thinks the evidence is fairly convincing that behavior is more reliant on specific situations than it is on traits inhering in the individual. He further claims, "The experimental record suggests that situational factors are often better predictors of behavior than personal factors, and this impression is reinforced by careful examination of behavior outside the confines of the laboratory" (p. 2). If such a criticism is valid, then Doris believes that we are obliged to lend a sympathetic consideration to the relevant experimental data, because it "will facilitate emotional, evaluative, and deliberative habits that are more defensible, more sensitive, and more conducive to ethically desirable behavior" (p. 2). Doris's commitments rely on experimental psychological literature that contends that not many people actually have the structures necessary to support the recommendation of Neo-Aristotelian virtue theories (Doris, p. 6).

Indeed, Doris thinks that traits might not hold up to closer scrutiny. He contends that when we attribute a trait to a person, we are expecting them to act in particular ways (ways that accord with the trait they possess) in the circumstances under which we would expect the trait to guide behavior (pp. 15-16). In agreement with Aristotle, Doris

accurately assesses that virtue theorists believe that traits should guide motivation, cognition, and emotional response, and not merely the agent's external "overt behavior." This assessment identifies as problematic the link virtue ethics tries to cultivate between the creation of certain internal states for the purpose of producing particular behaviors that will lead to a life of *eudaimonia* (p. 17).

Doris further contends that the language of virtue implicitly requires that virtues be "robust," so that "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" (p. 18). If traits do exist, then Doris thinks they should operate stably in the face of considerable difference of circumstance in which the agent finds herself. Behavior should exhibit a certain degree of sameness across conditions if trait theory is correct, and Doris thinks that such an understanding of robust traits is indeed required by virtue ethics. On this view, the validity of traits should be represented by reasonable consistency of behavior in circumstances that are not particularly conducive to the specific behavior (Doris, p. 19).

The sort of consistency that Doris contends is expected of virtue theorists is what Doris would characterize as "global virtue." He describes a globalist perspective of traits with reference to three characteristics: consistency, stability, and evaluative integration. Consistency means that a trait will cause appropriate behavior in widely varying circumstances. Stability refers to temporal constancy, which will cause the same behavior to be repeated over time as an agent encounters the identical circumstances. Finally, evaluative integration implies that similar traits or virtues

should be present in the moral agent and enacted in proper situations (p. 22). These three characteristics of a globalist approach to traits are expressed in condensed form in the statement that “Globalism construes personality as an *evaluatively integrated association of robust traits*” (p. 23). On Doris’s account, such globalism is asserted by virtue ethics by its claims about the constancy of virtue in differing circumstances.

Having presented what he perceives to be the central claims of globalism, Doris makes clear that his criticisms are primarily aimed at globalism, not at every possible conception of the virtues. He expresses this “central contention” by claiming the following:

Systematic observation typically fails to reveal the behavioral patterns expected by globalism; *globalist conceptions of personality are empirically inadequate.*

This is not to repudiate every aspect, or all variants of characterological moral psychology and personality psychology; I mean only to quarrel with commitments to the empirically inadequate aspects of globalism. (23)

Doris thinks that all three characteristics of globalism (consistency, stability, and evaluative integration) are admitted by Aristotle, while his form of situationism denies globalist claims to consistency and evaluative integration yet accepts a limited commitment to trait stability (p. 23, 25).

In the process of further explaining the sort of stability he hopes to support, Doris claims, “Although reflection on situationism has caused me to reject an understanding of behavior as ordered by robust traits, I allow for the possibility of temporally stable, situation-particular, ‘local’ traits that are associated with important differences in behavior” (25). Because the experimental evidence seems to conflict

with a globalist trait account, Doris refuses globalism but suggests that by referring to traits as operating in the context of narrowly circumscribed circumstances, some valid concept of traits (and virtues) may be salvaged. Doris affirms that traits may exist, but that they will not exhibit extensive consistency; instead, he “propose[s] probabilistic standards for trait attribution” (p. 25). While such local traits may exist, Doris understands experimental psychology to testify to personality as composed of “evaluatively *disintegrated* associations of multiple local traits” (p.25). To moderate this thesis somewhat, Doris encourages both situationists and dispositionists to attend to the admissions of their primary early proponents (Mischel and Allport) who reference both situations and traits as providing some predictive power (p. 25). Despite these tempering influences, Doris does believe that situations are centrally important in determining behavior in a way that traits are not (p. 26).

Doris goes on to provide further evidence for situationism, suggesting that trait psychology has been lent plausibility by pen-and-paper survey techniques, but that behavioral observation does not coincide with the data collected in self-report methods, such as the survey method (pp. 26-27). As psychologists begin to attend more to the actual experimental data collected in particular situations relevant to specific traits, Doris thinks that the weaknesses of trait predictions becomes increasingly apparent. Doris describes trait psychology’s weakness in the face of the evidence in the following manner:

The problem is not that substantial situational factors have substantial effects on what people do, but that seemingly insubstantial situational factors have substantial effects on what people do. The disproportionate impact of these

made of 'insubstantial' situational factors press charges of empirical inadequacy against characterological moral psychology: If dispositional structures were typically so robust as familiar conceptions of character and personality lead one to believe, insubstantial factors would not so frequently have such impressive effects. (p. 28)

As observed in the previous section, Doris here refers to seemingly minor situational features of dimes, cookies, lawnmower noise, and group effects. If the situational aspects of these experiments had been more significant or more closely related to the behavior being tested, Doris would have expected some variance in the behavior proscribed by virtuous dispositions, but he thinks it highly problematic that such innocuous aspects of a situation seem to powerfully determine behavior. Because of these surprising effects of situational factors, Doris claims, "The situationist does not deny that people have personality traits; she instead denies that people typically have highly general personality traits that affect behavior manifesting a high degree of cross-situational consistency" (pp. 38-39). Thus, if there is some way to conceive of personality traits as not requiring consistency in diverse circumstances, for instance in the "local" manner that Doris has previously suggested, Doris is not opposed to traits conceived in such limited terms. Globalism simply does not hold up when behavior is considered in differing circumstances, for behavior seems to be only as consistent as are the circumstances in which a person finds herself (Doris, p. 64).

If trait globalism does not hold up under psychological scrutiny, then what might be a more moderate perspective that might coincide better with the experimental data and with more local trait attributions? Doris contends that a distinction must be

made between demands for temporal stability and cross-situational stability. He thinks that despite other objections, most situationists are willing to admit that temporal stability does indeed exist, meaning that it is appropriate to expect similar behavior in “iterated trials of highly similar situations. Where such temporal stability obtains, we are justified in attributing highly contextualized dispositions or ‘local’ traits” (Doris, p. 64). What might this distinction between global and local traits look like in real-world contexts? Under globalist assumptions, one might expect a person who possesses the trait of honesty to act honestly even in circumstances that place extraordinary pressure on the agent to lie or cheat (as when taking an important examination). A person should be just as honest in this circumstance as in a situation that does not exert pressure to lie or cheat. Globalism expects that dispositions will produce trait-relevant behavior in diverse situations, even when the person might be experiencing hunger, tiredness, distraction, pressure, or stress.

Having discarded this sort of globalism as untenable, Doris advocates for conceiving of traits as local. Instead of traits being applicable across a broad array of circumstances, Doris would want to talk about traits with reference to specific circumstances. Rather than speak of the trait of “honesty,” Doris would instead prefer talk of the trait of “honesty-when-not-in-a-hurry-or-tired” (p. 115). Such narrowing of trait predictions to behavior in particular circumstances seems more consistent with the experimental data (p. 66). Doris condenses his sentiments about globalism and local trait attribution into the following compendious statement:

I therefore contend personality should be conceived of as *fragmented*; an evaluatively disintegrated association of situation-specific local traits....Four

related observations tell against globalism and for the fragmentation hypothesis.

(1) Low consistency correlations suggest that behavior is not typically ordered by robust traits. (2) The determinative impact of unobtrusive situational factors undermines attribution of robust traits. (3) The tenuous relationship found between personality measures and overt behavior leaves globalist accounts of human functioning empirically undersupported. (4) Biographical information often reveals remarkable personality disintegration. (Doris, pp. 64-65)

These conclusions inspire Doris to consider what possible direction is open to virtue ethics and trait psychology in the wake of the overturning of globalist commitments. Indeed he ponders giving up trait psychology in its entirety in favor of behavioral explanations that refer only to situational factors (p. 65).

Doris proceeds to extend the conversation more explicitly into the realm of the moral by claiming, "If moral behavior has a strong cognitive component, and cognition is highly context-sensitive, one should expect moral behavior to be highly context-sensitive" (p. 70). If global *traits* are psychologically implausible, then so may be the *virtues*, since Aristotle does refer to the virtues as proceeding "from a firm and unchanging state" (1105a34-35). Such a characterization does sound considerably like modern trait globalism. If the virtues do not inhere in humans in ways that allow for consistently moral behavior, then perhaps virtue ethics (at least as its moral psychology currently exists) does not provide a psychologically valid approach to trying to live well.

Doris wants to maintain that traits do still have some predictive role in behavior but that moral psychology has significantly overstated the role that these traits play in

relation to situational factors (p. 75). Doris comments describe the purpose of his ethical reflections in the following manner:

My skepticism is not *radically revisionary*—generally problematizing ethical thought—but *conservatively revisionary*—problematizing only particular, and dispensable, features of ethical thought associated with characterological moral psychology....Why then doesn't my proposal count as radically revisionary? In short, because central ethical practice can survive, and indeed will benefit from, the revisions I advocate....I'm claiming that ethical reflection can safely dispense with notions of character, so it follows straightaway that my revisionism does not threaten radical revisionism. (pp. 107-108)

Doris does not see his own claims as presenting a threat to the general plausibility of doing ethics. Instead he simply thinks that the moral psychology of virtue ethics has often been radically unrealistic, and he is interested in making such reflection more plausible. By referring to traits as local constructs instead of global constructs, Doris thinks that ethical reflection can be significantly improved.

Owen Flanagan.

Flanagan's form of situationism precedes Doris's by 11 years. Flanagan was the first theorist to begin to assemble the arguments of situationism and apply them to virtue ethics. In formulating his initial claims, Flanagan explains that he is motivated to improve ethical theory by making ethical reflection more psychologically realistic. He explains this commitment in terms of the "Principle of Minimal Psychological Realism" (PMPR). The PMPR advises ethicists to "make sure when constructing a moral theory or projecting a moral ideal that the character, decision processing, and behavior

prescribed are possible, or are perceived to be possible, for creatures like us” (Flanagan, 1991, p. 32). In a way that prefigures the later criticisms of Doris, Flanagan argues that ethics has failed to match ethical requirements with the functional abilities of humans’ personalities and deliberative capacities. He perceives that the power of situations may be a force that traits may not be strong enough to overcome. Thus, his perspective is largely confirmed by the later analysis of Doris, yet his conceptualization is more optimistic about the existence of traits and about the possibilities for human flourishing that exist even amidst the strong situational influences that threaten to disintegrate moral agents.

Of central importance to Flanagan is the task of defining the necessary interrelation of situations and traits. To this end, he notes that human personalities and their corresponding traits are always contextualized and situated in particular circumstances. No utterly de-contextualized person exists. Therefore, psychologists, of necessity, must attend to the role of situations in determining behavior (Flanagan, p. 260). Recognition of this constant dynamic interaction between traits and situations causes Flanagan to incorporate situational factors into the very definition of a trait. He explains, “Traits are highly situation-sensitive psychological and behavioral dispositions with multifarious relations to one another. And they are individuated, in part in terms of the complex relations they have to other traits, to behavior, and to the environment” (p. 277). Thus, here Flanagan argues that traits themselves, although often placed in opposition with situational factors, are in fact not even coherent outside of particular situations. Traits are at least partially defined by situations. If traits are formed in and defined by situations, then Flanagan advises that our trait language

should reflect the contingency of these traits as related to situations, suggesting that it is misleading to “take trait names as names for simple substantive things when they are in fact names for complex processes with fuzzy edges” (p. 278).

As the controversy between trait psychologists and situationists has progressed, both sides of the debate have seemed to express the deep interconnectedness of traits and situations as detrimental. Both camps have suggested that it would somehow be better or more helpful if traits were static and not situationally dependent, but Flanagan actually argues that “the personal and situational anchoring of various trait ascriptions helps them gain a much richer meaning than the default meaning” (p. 280). After all, if traits were indeed somehow situationally independent, of what would behavior consist? People would be static responders, largely unable to cope with or respond to their environments since they would respond identically, even when situations called for differing responses.

The real-world implausibility of utterly situation-insensitive traits causes Flanagan to argue that, although those in the field of personality psychology had seemingly posited global traits, it would be unrealistic to have ever expected that such traits could exist (p. 280). Furthermore, Flanagan sees this determination as having direct and important implications for Neo-Aristotelian ethical formulations. He comments:

It is surely a legitimate charge against many recent forays into the revival of virtue ethics or an ethics of character that the virtues are seen as what steels ‘the good person’ against any circumstantial pressures. All the results discussed here should make us skeptical of this picture of the good person as one with the

situational psychological apparatus which readies him or her to withstand the pressures of all situations and temptations. (p. 312)

If *traits* are not the sorts of things that we can expect (or desire) to be utterly insensitive to the environmental pressures in which agents find themselves, then neither should ethics apply such stringent requirements to the *virtues*.

Therefore, Flanagan's vision of the impact of situationism on trait psychology and virtue ethics is somewhat more moderate and positive than Doris's, perhaps due to a greater degree of sensitivity to the relevant research. He encouragingly concludes:

There are some more cheerful ways to conceive of the situation. First, our radical plasticity means...that opportunities for change, growth, and improvement are ever present....Second, and relatedly, there is the exhilaration that can come from seeing the human project as a creative one, of seeing ourselves as actively involved in the process of making ourselves who we are, with the resources available in our vicinity. (p. 335)

Flanagan thinks that trait psychology and virtue ethics must be reconceptualized to account for the relative instability of traits that experimental psychology demonstrates, yet, Flanagan also thinks that such a perspective leaves open a certain sort of optimism about humans and their existential ability to live well and form their own identities as they attend to the complex interaction between situations and traits.

Gilbert Harman.

In contrast to the relatively moderate revisions that proceed from Flanagan's insistence on modest psychological realism in ethics, Harman (1999) argues for a more extreme conclusion than either Doris or Flanagan suggest. Harman proposes a radical

situationism that proposes the utter implausibility of trait theories of virtue, and argues for an eliminativism that would discard such theories altogether. Harman insists in the following manner that traits are not helpful or necessary for understanding human behavior:

We very confidently attribute character traits to other people in order to explain their behaviour. But our attributions tend to be wildly incorrect and, in fact, there is no evidence that people differ in character traits. They differ in their situations and in their perceptions of their situations. They differ in their goals, strategies, neuroses, optimism, etc. But character traits do not explain what differences there are. (1999, p. 329)

Given the psychological experimental data that had occurred to the point in 1999 when Harman wrote this article, Harman reasoned that none of the results from any of this experimental work convincingly demonstrated the existence of personality traits. Situations alone could convincingly explain differences in behavior across persons.

Harman's form of eliminative situationism would have drastic consequences for virtue ethics, since complete elimination of actual trait structures would seem to discount virtue as a psychological impossibility. Without dispositions, the virtues cannot be inculcated in individual personalities. Harman seems to direct ethicists toward discarding virtue ethics, insisting, "We must conclude that, despite appearances, there is no empirical support for the existence of character traits (1999, p. 330).

Harman represents the extreme extension of situationism, which would deny the psychological plausibility of virtue ethics outright; yet such an extreme form of situationism is not a majority opinion in the contemporary psychological community.

Other psychologists even criticize Harman's account as problematically unsustainable (Jost & Jost, 2009, p. 253). Despite the fact that Harman's perspective represents a minority opinion in social psychology, radical situationism has often been taken as the typical orientation of social psychologists.

Kwame Anthony Appiah.

In his 2008 book, *Experiments in Ethics*, Appiah, like the others considered in this section, argues for the involvement of other disciplines in the process of ethical reflection (pp. 1-2). Although Western intellectuals have often disavowed the possibility of recognizing the relevance of empirical research in moral philosophy due to the perceived importance of distinguishing between facts and norms, Appiah suggests that moral philosophy has much to learn from the empirical research of psychologists. "Even if you couldn't derive an 'ought' from an 'is,' facts would still be relevant to moral life. Morality is practical," claims Appiah (p. 22). In a line fairly similar to that pursued by Flanagan (1991) in *Varieties of Moral Personality*, Appiah is convinced that moral philosophy must be guided by the fact that *ought* implies *can*. That is, that the injunctions that morality lays down for people must be actually capable for them to accomplish. After all, "What would be the point of norms that human beings were psychologically incapable of obeying?" (p. 22). The remainder of Appiah's book considers what the actual contributions of experimental psychology are, and he constructively attempts to apply the insights gained from experimental research to making virtue ethics more psychologically realistic.

Like Flanagan, Doris, and Harman, Appiah sees the challenge of situationism as being about the disputed point that virtues have the degree of cross-situational

consistency that is usually alleged them by virtue ethicists. The primacy of deep characteristics seems to be implicit in virtue ethics' notion of a right action as being that which proceeds from reasonably stable character. Appiah notes that "virtues are more than simple dispositions to do the right thing. Those who draw on Aristotle's ideas are likely to stress, with Hursthouse...that the dispositions in question are deep, stable, and enmeshed in yet other traits and dispositions" (p. 35). If ethicists question the depth or cross-situational integrity of dispositions, Appiah notes that they may be tempted to salvage virtue concepts by contending that situationism merely re-locates the motivation of good action. Instead, Appiah wants to simply suggest that virtue ethics make certain

Perhaps ethicist can recognize that situations can have their affects and still continue insisting on the importance of forming the virtues. After all, if situations and traits can both cause good action, does it really matter which one does? The answer, for the virtue ethicist, must be to the affirmative. Aristotle and later virtue ethicists count as central the fact that people's dispositions should be shaped, such that good action proceeds from their character. The virtuous agent "must know [that he is doing virtuous actions]...[and] he must decide on them, and decide on them for themselves" (Aristotle, trans. 1999, 1105a29-35). If behavior is caused by situational factors, then the proper action may be done, but it will not have been done in the way the virtuous agent would do it—from character and from the will to act virtuously. For this reason, Appiah comments that "the virtue ethicist cannot be content that one acts *as if* virtue ethics is true" (p. 45). For the moral psychology of virtue ethics to remain plausible, action must indeed proceed from character and not merely from external elements of the environment. Such a claim becomes more understandable in Appiah's claim that "If

these psychological claims are right, very often when we credit people with compassion, as a character trait, we're wrong. They're just in a good mood" (p. 45). If good mood is the cause of proper action, then on Aristotle's account, that person is not actually virtuous. Virtues do not merely have an effect at the level of the emotions—the virtues must also penetrate deep into the agent's cognitive/affective structure, going "all the way down," as Hursthouse suggests (1999, p. 12).

Amidst the unsettling results of situationism, Appiah does not conclude that virtue ethicists need be as radically disturbed by the claims of situationism as Harman would advise. Instead, Appiah wants to simply suggest that virtue ethics make certain accommodations, lending additional attention to situational factors. If virtue ethics more seriously attends to situations, Appiah seems to think that virtue ethics may faithfully continue as a viable ethical scheme. "The situationist hypothesis is only that, in explaining behavior, we're inclined to overestimate disposition and underestimate situation. It doesn't claim that dispositions don't exist" (Appiah, 2008, p. 50). Thus, Appiah is not committed to the non-existence of traits; instead, he is merely convinced that they are not as robust or global as virtue theorists have often assumed.

In this regard, Appiah's central concern is exceedingly similar to that of Doris. If virtue ethics rejects trait globalism, it can profit from "accept[ing] what is true in situationism. Individual moments of compassion and moments of honesty make our lives better, even if we are not compassionate or honest through and through" (p. 70). Appiah's warning, then, is that experimental psychology may not support deep dispositions, but that the good life may be attained without such presuming the depth of dispositions that virtue ethicists have often demanded. At the same time, Appiah thinks

that by leveraging the fact that virtue relies on character formation, it may actually be able to refute some of the arguments of situationism, since virtue cannot be gauged solely (or even primarily) on what people *do*. It is important to remember, according to Appiah, that “we can distinguish...between having a virtue and being disposed to do the virtuous act over a wide range of circumstances” (p. 61). Thus, Appiah implies that it might be possible to maintain that a deeply virtuous person may sometimes be deceived or undermined by features of his circumstances. A person could still be virtuous despite the inability to act perfectly in every circumstance in which she finds herself. At the same time, the virtuous person may at times act in ways that do not seem virtuous to an external observer but actually are virtuous, given the agent’s awareness of the relevant situational factors. The difficulty of interpreting what counts as virtuous action thus emerges as a central concern of this conversation. From this explanation, Appiah’s moderate form of situationism thus calls for a reduced reliance on global traits that exhibit perfect cross-situational consistency in favor of less-robust traits that allow people to live well, despite the fact that traits do break down under the force of some situational pressures.

Summarizing Situationism

In this section, I have presented a history of the criticisms that situationists have levied against personality trait constructs and explained some of the important experimental evidence that has supported their claims. I have also offered Doris’s criticism of global trait constructs and globalist approaches to virtue, followed by similar explanations of the claims of Flanagan, Harman, and Appiah. Harman’s proposal stood out as the most radical but also as potentially unsustainable. The other

three theorists argued similarly on several important points. First, they agree that virtue ethics may profit from attention to experimental research. None of these three are interested in discarding virtue or morality entirely. Second, they all argue that the experimental evidence does not corroborate globalist accounts of the traits and virtuous dispositions. Some way of moderating the “robustness” of traits and virtue will have to be embraced if virtue concepts are to be realistic. Third, weakness of character should promote additional attention to situational factors that have a more profound effect on behavior than had been previously thought by personality psychologists and virtue ethicists. These points describe, in general terms, the direction social psychological concerns are pushing virtue ethical considerations.

In the next chapter, I will explore the contemporary conclusions of the debate between situationists and dispositionists in the first section. After drawing on the latest experimental data and the interpretations of psychologists attentive to the forty-year history of the debate, the second section will investigate what particular arguments Aristotelian and Neo-Aristotelian virtue theorists may muster to respond to situationist criticisms. In the third and fourth sections, I will present a final experimental study important to situationism and explain how virtue ethicists may be able to interpret the findings in ways sympathetic to virtue ethics. Finally, in the fifth section I will suggest what virtue ethics can learn from situationism and how engagement with the debate in psychology can improve ethical reflection, character, and action.

Chapter 3: Conclusions and Outcomes of the Situationist Controversy

Recent Experimental Conclusions of the Debate

Now that several prominent analyses of the controversy between situationists and dispositionists have been surveyed and a reasonable understanding of various approaches has been gained, it will be possible to consider the most recent conclusions that seem to be developing in the conversation between situationism and dispositionism. Recent researchers and theorists seem to be generally in agreement that psychologists are declaring a sort of uneasy truce.

At the outset, it is important to be reminded that of the prominent voices investigating the implications of situationism for virtue ethics, Doris, Flanagan, and Appiah have all advanced fairly moderate conclusions for the implications of virtue ethics. In their own ways, they have essentially rejected a sort of trait globalism and contended that virtue ethics must be more attentive to the important relevance of situations for virtuous action. Only Harman has advanced a radically revisionary situationism that would suggest that concepts of virtues or traits have become outmoded by the importance of situations. Yet, even Harman seems to have developed a softer perspective in his later theorizing. According to a 2005 document, Harman explains, "I do not think that social psychology demonstrates there are no character traits, either as ordinarily conceived or as required for one or another version of virtue ethics. I do think that social psychology tends to undermine one's confidence that it is obvious there are

such traits” (pp. 16-17). Thus, even Harman allows the possibility that traits and virtue might plausibly exist, despite his reservations about the actuality of their presence in average people.

In 2002, Doris seemed to perceive well the general direction of the discussion about situationism. He comments that “All parties should agree that behavioral outcomes are inevitably a function of a complex interaction between organism and environment” (p. 26). By this admission, Doris delineates a middle ground between extreme situationism and extreme situationism—a position which some have labeled “interactionism.”

Interactionism argues that neither the adamant situationist nor the ardent trait theorist gets behavioral prediction right by referring solely to situations or merely to personality traits. Arguing that either situations or traits have no role in determining human behavior seems to be a vain enterprise, given the experimental data and what seems to be an accurate interpretation of that data. David Funder (2009) offers the following assessment:

The ‘person-situation debate’ triggered by the 1968 publication of Mischel’s *Personality and Assessment* ended as a serious scientific conversation decades ago (Kendrick & Funder, 1988). Personality traits are real and important. The days are long past when anybody who followed the literature could seriously entertain arguments that they exist only in the eye of the beholder, are mere social constructions, or have relations with behavior that are too small to matter. (p. 120)

In the heat of the argument about situations and persons, each side seems to have overestimated the ability of isolated traits or situations to explain human behavior. The problem with arguing about whether situations or traits govern human behavior is that such a controversy creates an unnecessary and false dichotomy between traits and situations. Traits occur in situations, and traits help people choose in which situations they will involve themselves. Appropriately, Brent Roberts (2009) comments, "One cannot infer a trait without context" (p. 139). Just like Aristotle indicates, virtuous behavior occurs in response to particular situations (trans. 1999, 1109a25-30). Because traits occur in situations, situational factors can have a profound effect on traits, encouraging particular behavior and the formation of particular dispositions.

An interactionist approach to understanding and predicting behavior is encouraged by broad contemporary agreement of the valid existence and importance of character traits (Fleeson & Nofle, 2009 p. 152; "If the person-situation debate," 2009, p. 146; Roberts, 2009, p. 137). Despite the attacks of a radical eliminativism, experimental psychology has shown that traits are important in predicting such things as "mortality, health, marital satisfaction, divorce, and occupational success (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006; Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007)" (Roberts, 2009, p. 137). Roberts also argues that traits were disproved on the condition that global stability across situations was required to prove their existence. Local traits do seem to exist and Roberts argues that they are sufficient evidence for trait theory to flourish. Roberts contends that trait theorists do not expect trait globalism.

Roberts explains that misguided expectations of globalism seem to have arisen due to inattention to distinguishing between temporal stability and cross-situational

stability. Although situationists have sometimes argued that cross-situational stability is the golden standard for proving the existence and relevance of traits, Roberts contends that “the existence of behavioral consistency is not at all synonymous with the definition [of] personality traits. Rather temporal consistency is key to the existence of personality traits, and there is little argument over its existence” (pp. 139-140).

Remember that cross-situational consistency is behavioral stability across differing situations, while temporal consistency is behavioral stability when repeatedly exposed to the same or highly similar circumstances. Roberts suggests that if researchers attend to the distinction between these two types of consistency, they will note that temporal consistency does exist; and, according to some personality theorists, the existence of temporal stability is enough to demonstrate the existence of traits.

A relatedly important distinction is between consistency at the level of individual behaviors and at the level of behavioral aggregates. Fleeson & Nofle (2009) explain that trait theorists suggest that “aggregates of behavior are highly consistent, which proves traits exist (Epstein, 1979; Fleeson, 2001)” (p. 152). At the same time both situationists and dispositionists “acknowledge that average behaviors are highly consistent, and that single behaviors are less consistent” (p. 152). Thus, if the existence of traits is predicated on point predictions about specific behaviors being consistent cross-situationally, then a case may be maintained against the existence of traits. Yet such a criterion does not seem to be the correct one for attribution of traits. Behavioral aggregates show behavioral stability, despite variance in individual behaviors and this stability is enough to establish the existence of traits. Fleeson and Nofle (2009) believe that differentiating between these two kinds of consistency proposes an alternative

model to interactionism for explaining human behavior. They dub their model a “synthetic resolution to the person situation debate.” They contend the following about such a synthetic resolution:

We believe the proposed synthesis resolution is preferable to the interactionist resolution, because the interactionist resolution tries to break one type of consistency into different sources, whereas the proposed resolution is based on the recognition of multiple types of consistency. Furthermore, the synthesis is focused on consistency in varying levels of content breadth (eg., it includes both the consistency of single behaviors and aggregated behavior). (Fleeson &

Noftle, p. 152)

By recognizing different types of consistency, the authors argue that the person-situation debate may be framed in terms that do not put persons and situations at odds with one another. Although, Fleeson & Noftle offer their theory as superior to the interactionist approach, it seems that both perspectives provide additional assistance in understanding person-situation interaction. Each of the following distinctions seems to provide some assistance in conceptualizing person-situation interaction: distinctions between situations and traits, between cross-situational stability and temporal stability, and between consistency on the level of particular human actions and on the level of aggregated behavior. Therefore, both interactionist and synthetic explanations may be helpful in mediating between the claims of situationists and dispositionists.

Contemporary researchers seem to be recognizing the misguided conclusions that resulted from the inflexible squabbles between dispositionists and situationists.

fairly described as interactionists. Gordon Allport, Henry Murray, and Raymond

Brent Roberts (2009) insightfully offers the following perspective on the history of situationism:

Hogan. The divisions created by *Personality and Assessment* impeded progress in personality development because it polarized the field into seemingly irreconcilable camps.....These two camps fit neatly into two extreme positions that had unfortunate effects on the study of personality development. One group [the dispositionists] emphasized stability, the other [the situationists] change. To this day, neither camp seems motivated to acknowledge the obvious truth that it is both. (p. 137)

Broad consensus has emerged that researchers must look for the proper source of behavior at the intersection between dynamically interacting personality traits and situations (Funder, 2009, p. 120; Griffo & Colvin, 2009, p. 243; Hill & Lapsley, 2009, p. 245; Hogan, 2009, p. 249; Holmes & Wood, 2009, p. 250; "If the person-situation debate," 2009, p. 146; Johnson, 2009, p. 251; Jost & Jost, 2009, p. 253; Krueger, 2009, p. 134; Mischel, 2009, pp. 284-285 Roberts, 2009, p. 137, 139; Schultheiss, Kordik, Kullmann, Rawolle, & Rösch, 2009, p. 268; Shiner, 2009, p. 270; Tracy, Robins, & Sherman, 2009, p. 272; Vazire & Doris, 2009, p. 274). To a considerable extent, the arguments of situationism seem to have been aimed at a caricatured conception of dispositionism: that somehow traits might be global and utterly situation independent (Roberts, 2009, p. 139).

Essential to confirming that situationists have criticized a non-existent form of trait theory is the realization that even the pioneering originators of trait theory could be fairly described as interactionists. Gordon Allport, Henry Murray, and Raymond

Cattell, all important researchers in trait theory, included the effects of the environment in their considerations of the nature of human behavior (Griffo & Colvin, 2009, p. 243; Hogan, 2009, p. 249; Roberts, 2009, p. 139). Thus, situationism may draw attention to situational effects in ways that are helpful for personality psychology, but it does not present a devastatingly novel criticism to trait theory, because trait theory has included situational effects since its early formulations.

Not only have trait theories not generally adhered to a strict trait globalism, but the conclusions of trait theorists and situationists have been strikingly similar. In fact, Roberts (2009) thinks that “The most important thing that emerges from a close examination of the definition of personality traits is that they are indistinguishable from concepts that emerged from the social cognitive approach to personality” (p. 140).

Such a result would seem to validate the conclusion that personality and situation are mutually interactive functions, and some researchers have focused more on situational effects and some have focused more on trait effects. Yet both situations and traits are important.

Situations mold and cause specific traits to come into play, but situations are also chosen according to a person’s traits and these pre-existing traits mediate the specific effects that situations have on a person (Hogan, 2009, p. 249; Shiner, 2009, p. 270). Although this way of describing the production of behavior seems to better fit the experimental data, it still is very tempting to describe behavior more simply as the product of two static forces—situation and traits—that collide to produce behavior, yet this manner of conceptualizing the situation must be avoided. Both traits and situations are dynamic and mutually-interactive. The person-situation production of behavior

must be conceived of as a dynamic interaction between person, situation and behavior (Jost & Jost, 2009, p. 253).

Finally, to prevent the conclusion that the opinions represented are merely the product of a core bias toward a trait theoretical perspective, it is important to point out that even Walter Mischel (2009), the pioneering champion of situationism seems to agree that a form of interactionism provides the most productive means of continued behavioral study. He states, "To explain what people feel and think and do, we have to understand the person-situation conjunction, rather than splitting it or trying to estimate which side of it accounts for more of the variance in behavior" (p. 284). Thus, even Mischel seems to have overcome partisan arguments between situational and dispositional effects. Everyone seems to agree that both factors influence behavior. The current research goal is to understand the interaction, to learn how to productively train personalities, and to ascertain how situations that may help produce virtuous behavior.

A Virtuous Response to Situationism

Having surveyed the history of the situationism/dispositionism controversy and having arrived at some conclusions about the importance of both traits and situations in current research, it is again appropriate to situate the discussion in the context of ethics. What responses have virtue ethicists mustered in response to the varying degrees of threat proposed by the challenges of situationism? This section will present the responses of psychologists and philosophers attempting to defend virtue ethics against situationism.

On the other hand, the previous section has suggested that people do have at least limited trait capacities or "character structures," despite what Doru

Many of the situationists considered thus far, such as Doris, Appiah, and Flanagan, all recommend that increased attention to the behavioral sciences may have beneficial effects in advocating for an increasingly realistic form of virtue ethics. This sentiment seems to also be accepted by contemporary virtue ethicists. According to Maria Merritt (2000), “What situationist psychology makes problematic is not as such the recommendation to have the virtues, but the normative ideal of the virtues as qualities that must be possessed in a strongly self-sufficient form” (p. 375). Such self-sufficiency might be expected, given Aristotle’s seemingly monolithic description of the inflexibility of the virtue as causing action “from a firm and unchanging state” (Aristotle, trans. 1999, 1105a34-35). Many situationist critics have targeted this specific phrase in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to support their claims that virtue ethics relies on trait globalism, and some virtue ethicists (such as Merritt) recognize that claims of cross-situational consistency or virtue as global may need to be moderated from the language of Aristotle and his later interpreters. At the same time, situationist critics seem to have neglected attention to several other elements of Aristotle’s moral psychology that are more amiable to situationism’s findings.

To introduce one such neglected feature of Aristotle’s view, Doris (2002) helpfully points out one of the common criticisms of Aristotelian moral psychology. He thinks that it requires too much of moral agents. He claims, “The problem with character explanations, in my view, is rather less philosophically delicate: They presuppose the existence of character structures that actual people do not very often possess” (p. 6). On the other hand, the previous section has suggested that people do have at least limited trait capacities or “character structures,” despite what Doris

indicates. Instead, perhaps the rarity of virtuous character that Doris and other critics observe is simply a result of the difficulty of properly training and demonstrating virtuous character. About the difficulty of virtue, Aristotle and his later interpreters fully agree.

Recall that Aristotle conceives of the virtues as golden means between two extremes of vice. Aristotle offers the image of an archer attempting to hit a bullseye, saying, "There is only one way to be correct. That is why error is easy and correctness is difficult, since it is easy to miss the target and difficult to hit it" (trans. 1999, 1106b32-34). Becoming virtuous is not a simple task that may be accomplished by basic moral education. Instead, moral education happens over a person's lifetime.

Aristotle further elaborates:

We can be afraid, for instance, or be confident, or have appetites, or get angry, or feel pity, and in general have pleasure or pain, both too much and too little, and in both ways not well. But having these feelings at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the intermediate and best condition, and this is proper virtue. (1106b19-24)

Since virtue is this intermediate condition, the virtuous agent must, through much practice, aim at the mean, expecting to frequently deviate into various states of extremity, that is, into the vices.

To claim, as the situationists seem to, that virtue is difficult utterly fails to disrupt Aristotle's theory, since he explicitly acknowledges that the cultivation of the virtues is intensely difficult and that only a very few people will attain fully virtuous

character. In Aristotle's words, "It is also hard work to be excellent. For in each case it is hard work to find the intermediate....Hence doing these things well is rare, praiseworthy, and fine" (1109a25-30). Although Doris recognizes this same rarity of virtue, he more pessimistically uses such recognition to support his belief in the implausibility of trait structures as he has understood Aristotle to conceive of them. The important point, though, is that Doris (2002) allows that "Situationism does not preclude the existence of a few saints" (p. 60). Offering further corroboration, Appiah admits that Aristotle did not deceive people about the ease of becoming virtuous. According to Appiah (2008), "Acquiring virtue, Aristotle already knew, is hard; it is something that takes many years, and most people don't make it. [Social psychology] experiments might confirm the suspicion that compassionate men and women are rare, in part because becoming compassionate is difficult" (p. 49). This point about the difficulty of becoming truly virtuous is important in critically evaluating the relevance of the contemporary social psychological experiments for virtue ethics.

Having assessed the person-situation debate from both sides of the debate and from a philosophical virtue ethics perspective in the previous sections, I will apply those perspectives to one further social psychology experiment. First, I will explain this famous experiment and its conclusions, which have often been used to champion situationism. Second, I will critically assess the experimenters' methodology and experimental design in terms of the perspective gained from our previous investigation of the situationism/dispositionism debate. The following experiment was conducted by Darley and Batson in 1973 on a number of unsuspecting Princeton University seminarians.

A Test Case for Virtue Ethics: Darley and Batson

Darley and Batson's study primarily consisted of an experimental manipulation to determine if causing people to hurry from one destination to another would alter helping behavior. Princeton seminarians were briefed about a short speech they were supposed to develop and have recorded by the experimenters later in the experiment. The participants were briefed on the topic of their sermon in one building and were told to go to a second building to deliver their sermon. On the way from building to building, subjects encountered an accomplice of the experimenters, who acted as if he were ill and in need of assistance.

The basic experimental design consisted of two manipulations: the first manipulation was the nature of message that the seminarians were instructed to deliver. One group was instructed to deliver a talk on the Biblical parable of the Good Samaritan and the other group was told to develop a message about the nature of Christian ministry as vocation. The second manipulation was the degree of pressure under which the seminarians were placed to hurry from the building where they received instructions to the other building where they would deliver and record their message (There were three levels: low-, intermediate-, and high-hurry conditions.) One additional element of the experiment was that at the outset of the experiment, each of the subjects' personalities were measured according to their self-reports on a personality measurement survey. This information was used to determine whether participants understood religion as a means to attaining some other good, as a proper end with intrinsic worth of its own, or as something that served the purpose of fulfilling and responding to one's existential needs for meaning and purpose.

helping The experimenters hypothesized that participants instructed to deliver a helping-relevant message (the topic requiring meditation on the narrative of the Good Samaritan), would be more likely to help the apparently needy accomplice. They also predicted that subjects in the higher hurry conditions would be less likely to attend to the needs of the seemingly unwell accomplice. Finally, they predicted that participants who understood religion as quest or as an intrinsically good end in itself would offer more help than those who understood religion merely as a means to another end.

Yet the The results of the study demonstrated, first, that the participants assigned to deliver the message about the Good Samaritan were not more likely than the subjects speaking about ministry as vocation to exhibit greater helping behavior. Second, it demonstrated that the degree of hurry under which a participant was placed was, as expected, significantly correlated with helping behavior. In the low-hurry condition, 63% of the participants stopped to help the accomplice; in the intermediate-hurry condition, 45% of participants exhibited helping behavior; and in the high-hurry condition, a mere 10% offered assistance. Thus, increased hurry was found to be inversely related to helping behavior. Third, the study provided indeterminate conclusions about the role of the participants' understandings of religion.

The authors conclude that the situational effects of increased pressure on the participants to hurry from location to location seemed to overwhelm established traits in determining helping behavior. Importantly, the experimenters included a questionnaire at the end of their experiment to determine how participants had perceived the situation they had earlier encountered with the stranger needing assistance. Using the results of this questionnaire, the experimenters attempted to postulate a cause for the decreased

helping behavior exhibited in the high- and intermediate-hurry conditions. They suggest the following explanation:

It is difficult not to conclude...that the frequently cited explanation that ethics becomes a luxury as the speed of our daily lives increases is at least an accurate description. The picture that this explanation conveys is of a person seeing another, consciously noting his distress, and consciously choosing to leave him in distress. (Darley & Batson, 1973, p. 107)

Yet the experimenters go on to question this instinctual assessment. From the post-manipulation reports of the experimental participants, the experimenters found that some participants seem to have recognized the needy accomplice as potentially requiring assistance, but they did not seem to be able to make that assessment at the moment when a decision was required of them to help or not to help. In contrast, other participants indicated that "because of the time pressures, they did not perceive the scene in the alley as an occasion for an ethical decision" (Darley & Batson, p. 108). Further, other participants seem not to have assisted for the basic reason that they noticed the accomplice's need for assistance, but they intentionally resisted their urge to help in favor of continuing on toward their destination.

This study has been used repeatedly as a means of bolstering situationist claims to the power of the situation over dispositional factors. Doris, Appiah, and Flanagan all reference this experiment as an instance of situational pressures preventing dispositions from initiating helping behavior. While it is true that the experiment does seem to show how influential a pressure such as achieving a goal can be in determining behavior, these later interpreters have focused only on this finding of the experiment, to the

exclusion of several other important aspects of the experiment. The next section will draw attention to some of these neglected aspects of Darley and Batson's experiment, while drawing upon the previous analysis of the situationism-dispositionism debate to lend new understanding to Darley and Batson's results.

Analysis of Darley and Batson's Study

To further understand and interpret Darley and Batson's results, it is important to attend to the implications of several factors. A first crucial factor is the experimenters' admission that participants perceived and responded differently to the situation. Such differences between participants perhaps indicates differences in the personalities of the participants and therefore of the trait which they possessed. The experimenter's explanation of these interpersonal differences suggest that situational factors interacted with the participants unique personalities to determine whether they perceived the situation as one requiring them to lend aid and whether they then decided to help. It may be an unfair assessment to claim that situation overpowers disposition; perhaps it merely helps mediate how dispositional factors will cause behavior in particular circumstances. Differences in perception of the situation seem to confirm that the degree of hurry (the situational factor) interacted with people's personalities (the trait factor) in differing ways to determine behavior.

A second relevant factor is that the nature of the message about which the participants would be speaking did not seem to affect their choice to help or not to help. This result might be interpreted as evidence that moral education of the virtues has no practical implications for behavior. On the other hand, perhaps these results are expected evidence for a fact that Aristotle did understand: that virtuous behavior cannot

be learned merely by being taught about virtue. Aristotle understood that virtue requires a combination of teaching, exemplification of the virtues by more virtuous exemplars, and habituation of virtue in particular agents through experience (Aristotle, trans. 1999, 1179b1-4). This result of Darley and Batson's study does not show that moral education does not work; instead, it seems to show that moral education is harder than meditating on a story for a few minutes. Even Flanagan (1991) agrees that it is possible that "members of both groups were so focused on the demand to give a talk on short notice—on the performance demand—that they did not really, as it were, get into the spirit of the content of their talk" (p. 302). In other words, the pressures of the experimental context did not allow for the proper absorption of intellectual content about virtue concepts and thus did not accurately assess the effects of moral education as Aristotle recommended it be done. Darley and Batson's results seem to indicate that moral education ought to be more experiential (Aristotelian) if it is to be successful in effecting behavioral change.

A third important factor is the differences in personality measures and their relation to helping behavior. Recall that the experimenters used a questionnaire to determine whether participants understood religion as means, end, or quest. The results of this part of the experiment seem never to be referenced in the situationism literature, probably because the experimenters themselves do not seem to know exactly what to make of the data. The experimenters found that these measures of attitude toward religion did not strongly correlate to helping behavior as they had thought they might. Recall that the experimenters had predicted that participants who understood religion as end or quest would exhibit more helping behavior. Such a correlation did not

materialize in the experiment's results. Although pursuit of such a correlation failed, this measure resulted in another extremely interesting result.

Despite not finding a correlation between attitudes toward religion and helping behavior, the experimenters did find a correlation between attitude toward religion and the *type of helping behavior* that participants offered if they did stop to offer assistance to the needy accomplice. As the experimenters ran the experiment, they found the existence of a class of participants they deemed "super helpers." These super helpers, upon interpreting the situation to be one in which they should offer help to the accomplice, proceeded to insist on offering the accomplice help, despite the accomplice's repeated assurances of not needing assistance. Thus, the super helpers seem to display a certain sort of helping behavior that was inappropriately attuned to situational factors (such as ignoring the accomplice's pleas for the participant to simply leave them alone) and unresponsive to the accomplice's interpretation of the situation. The experimenters explain the following about the super helpers:

The former kind of helping [the inflexible helping of the super helpers] was likely to be displayed by subjects who expressed strong doctrinal orthodoxy.

Conversely, this fixed kind of helping was unlikely among subjects high on the religion as quest dimension. These latter subjects [those viewing religion as quest], who conceived of their religion as involving an ongoing search for meaning in their personal and social world, seemed more responsive to the victim's immediate needs and more open to the victim's definitions of his own needs. (Darley & Batson, 1973, p. 107)

The conclusion of this analysis seems to be that differences in a person's approach to religion are correlated with the type of helping behavior they will offer, and this result has some important implications for supporting affirmation of the existence of traits.

The implications of this correlation might be explained in the following manner. Although helping behavior was significantly affected by situation, seeming to deny trait influence, type of helping was still correlated with a seeming trait construct (participants' understanding of religion). Darley and Batson (1973) admit that "considerable variations were possible in the kinds of help given, and these variations did relate to personality measures" (p. 108). This admission seems to make evident an alternate interpretation of their results. With Aristotle, it is possible to affirm that virtue is difficult to acquire and not many people will succeed in becoming truly virtuous. Thus, many of the people in the study did not possess virtuous dispositions that were definitively enough formed to allow them to resist the situational pressures of the environment. This interpretation is bolstered by the affirmation that *some* of the participants did stop. Even in the high-hurry condition, 10% of participant stopped—remember, virtue is rare. The measures and experimental design used to assess virtue in this study account for averages across groups but do not allow assessment of individual agents to determine whether a few virtuous agents might exist amidst the other non-virtuous agents. Darley and Batson attempted to select virtuous agents by running their experiments on seminarians, but it seems unlikely that enrollment in seminary is an adequate indication of virtuous character. Thus, the rarity of virtue might still explain of why so few participants stopped in the high hurry condition.

design Traits might then help to explain differences on the level of *types* of helping behavior. The experimenters, in an extremely important admission at the very end of their study, admit that “Clear light of hindsight suggests that the dimension of kinds of helping would have been the appropriate place to look for personality differences...; *whether* a person helps or not is an instant decision likely to be situationally controlled” (Darley & Batson, 1973, p. 108). With this admission, the experimenters indicate that their main experimental manipulation (of determining how hurrying affecting whether participants stopped to help) did not directly measure the effects of traits on behavior. Instead, changes in *type* of assistance offered seem to be a better gauge of trait effects, and the experimenters admit there was a correlation between personality and *type* of helping. These conclusions seem, then, to affirm both the power of the situation and of dispositions in helping to determine behavior. Reference to both of these factors, instead of merely the primary effect of hurrying on stopping to help, allows for a more interactionist understanding of person and situation in Darley and Batson’s study, instead of the strict situationist interpretation for which others have typically argued.

107). All of the above considerations seem to provide a fairly convincing interpretation of Darley and Batson’s study that fits rather well with virtue theory. In several ways, the experiment points to the existence of character traits (although in ways perhaps too subtle for most interpreters to comment upon). Additionally, it confirms Aristotle’s affirmation of the rarity of virtue and of the inability for virtue to be taught through mere education of the intellect. In addition to these factors, there is a final important aspect of the experiment to which to draw attention. The experimental

(Kamtekar, 2004, p. 470). In cases where the experimenter’s assumptions about virtue

design is of considerable importance in discerning what implications this study, and others like it, have for virtue ethics.

In their study, Darley and Batson have denoted a specific behavior, stopping to help a seemingly distressed person, as the factor that will demonstrate a compassionate disposition. Sreenivasan (2002) notes that “in order to articulate our understanding of a particular trait, such as honesty, we have to specify which responses are to count as 'honesty-relevant behaviour', as well as to specify which situations are to count as 'honesty-eliciting' situations” (p. 57). Such recognition of the constructed nature of the standards for trait measurement should naturally invite the question of whether it is appropriate in the context of Darley and Batson’s experiment to label helping a stranger seemingly in need of help as a behavior strictly relevant to a trait such as compassion, which Darley and Batson seem to be trying to measure. In their study, it does seem that they have constructed a situation that rather clearly draws on dispositions to provide assistance (Darley and Batson even note that some of the participants “literally stepped over the victim” as they hurried toward the other building) (Darley & Batson, 1973, p. 107).

Sreenivasan notes that in any experiment examining virtue, it is potentially problematic that the experimenters usually denote which behaviors will count as trait-relevant without attending to the subjects’ perceptions of what should count as trait-relevant behavior (p. 51). Kamtekar agrees with Sreenivasan’s reservation, commenting, “It is noteworthy that the experiments appealed to by situationists for the most part assume that subjects share the experimenter's construal of the situation” (Kamtekar, 2004, p. 470). In cases where the experimenter’s assumptions about virtue

are not the same as the participant's, the difficulty of properly making conclusions about trait-relevant behavior becomes more significant. By asking about the participants' perceptions of the experiment, Darley and Batson were able to partially assess whether their operationalization of trait-relevant conditions matched those of the participants. Darley and Batson thus escape the brunt of this difficulty of operationalizing trait-relevant behavior, but other situationist experiments are more vulnerable to this criticism.

A further challenge, connected with the difficulty of operationalizing trait-relevant behavior in relation to both subject and experimenter, is that the limitations of an experimental context simply may not allow experimenters to effectively assess virtue as Aristotle and his later interpreters understand it. One problem emerges from considering human behavior as part of a narrative. According to Aristotle, virtue certainly emerges out of the context of proper upbringing, education, practice, and the presence of certain external goods. In this way, moral behavior inheres in people who are the products of, and participants in, a narrative. This narrative understanding of virtuous lives is particularly emphasized by MacIntyre (p. 219). On the expectation that moral behavior emerges out of narrative forms of life as MacIntyre suggests, Montmarquet (2003) argues that "the role of character in human life is not well measured in situations in which we are basically passive creatures, whose larger plans and purposes are 'on hold', as we respond to a situation of someone's else's construction" (p. 366). This criticism makes considerable sense in the context of human life as a narrative. Researchers should expect that forcing a participant to suspend the

situations that require their attention and those that do not.

usual narrative of her life, with its particular contingencies and goals, should have a significant effect on the validity of assessing virtue in an ordinary experimental context.

Understanding virtue in the context of narrative forms of life presents further questions about participants' interpretations of particular circumstances. Kamtekar (2004) argues that we must do a more realistic job describing what we expect from the virtuous agent in an experimental context. We cannot expect that virtuous agents will express helping behavior in *every* circumstance (pp. 274-275). Aristotle's virtuous person is able, through practical wisdom, to discern how to act in particular circumstances, and not every circumstance will seem to the agent to call for helping behavior of the sort that experimenters expect.

Due to this limitation, Kamtekar (2004) argues that "we should only expect that the very helpful person will stop often, and more often than the not-so-helpful person, because she has judged that helping is important" (p. 475). Such an expectation seems appropriate, given Aristotle's understanding of behavior as falling on a scale between the virtuous mean and extremes of vice, but Darley and Batson's experimental design does not allow for such a comparison. Kamtekar's assertion is thus that such experiments as Darley and Batson's often expect expressions of virtue that they should not expect of deliberative moral agents. In fact, Kamtekar concludes, "Indeed, much of what is identified as troubling inconsistency (on a single trait-dimension) by situationist psychologists would seem to be necessary for consistency in doing well in a practically rational creature" (p. 484). In other words, variation of the sort found in such experiments may actually indicate that virtuous agents are discriminating between situations that require their attention and those that do not.

Such realization again affirms the extreme importance of care in operationalizing experimental values of trait-relevant behavior. As a combined whole, these considerations seem to heavily undermine whatever direct support Darley and Batson's study might have offered to a more radical form of situationism. These considerations have also allowed us to recognize the more general difficulties of assessing virtue in an experimental context. Given such difficulty, the next section will offer orienting suggestions for future attempts to experimentally examine virtue and it will expand on the comments here directed at Darley and Batson's study.

Suggestions for Future Experimental Assessment of Virtue

The experimental evidence makes one thing clear about the future research agenda: it should *not* concern itself with proving either situations or traits to be the only important factor in behavioral prediction. Currently, general consensus has emerged that traits do exist and their effects are important to study. The argument between trait theorists and situationists has largely concluded that both traits and situations are important components in predicting human behavior. Experimental considerations of virtue should share Mischel's (2009) advice to focus research efforts on "the person-situation conjunction" (p. 284). Experiments should attempt to assess how situation and trait constructs interact to facilitate or discourage the formation of the virtues. Yet, as we have noted above in the context of Darley and Batson's study, examining virtue in an experimental context faces several serious difficulties.

First, as a survey of the experimental literature supporting situationism will attest, experimenters have usually attempted to assess virtue by focusing on a single behavior in the often semi-artificial confines of a laboratory and experimental context.

Doris (2002) notes that such focus on only one particular behavior may not allow for virtue to be measured appropriately, yet such a focus has been maintained to eliminate experimental confounds and to avoid the higher cost of focusing on multiple behaviors (p. 71). Limited focus on a single trait in a laboratory context removes participants from their usual narrational context, which contains its own goals, aspirations, and perceptions. Such investigation is complicated by Montmarquet's (2003) warning that "a generous person's generosity will most likely be revealed not in a series of isolated, unconnected acts of spontaneous generosity" (p. 365). Instead, Montmarquet argues that moral agents usually express virtues in terms of projects extended over time and in the context of their life's narrative. Montmarquet therefore contends that "insofar as psychological experiments catch one 'outside' of his normal projects, persistent character traits are less likely to reveal themselves here than in other situations" (p. 365). By examining participants on particular behaviors, participants are unable to understand their actions as part of their usual narrative.

In a corresponding way, Montmarquet believes that virtuous people's dispositions will usually prevent them from entering situations in which it will be difficult to act virtuously, yet experiments force virtuous people into such circumstances (p. 365). Such considerations place seemingly severe limitations on what experiments in ethics may be able to achieve in revealing the nature of virtue. Thus, although they are quite expensive and difficult to control due to experimental confounds, longitudinal studies seem to provide a better means of assessing virtue, rather than isolated experiments examining a single behavior (Doris, 2002, p. 121).

be explained by the dismissal a response that the semistarvation behavior was produced by

Second, measurement of virtue in an experimental context is exceedingly difficult. On one hand, there is an issue of congruence in the perception of a situation as requiring a particular virtue. Here there may be discrepancies between the conceptualization of the experimenter and the moral agent (participant). On the other hand, there is an issue of measuring virtue-relevant behavior. Should experimenters rely on self-reports of virtue, or should they defer to a third-party observer to quantify the participant's moral behavior? Some experimenters argue for observer-based analysis, since it has been suggested that participants are more ignorant of their own behavior than is a third-party observer (Doris, 2002, p. 44; Vazire & Doris, 2009, p. 274). Other experimenters argue that observational data must be balanced with methods that rely more on the perceptions of the moral agent (Sreenivasan, 2002, p. 50). Perhaps the best conclusion here is that experimenters should be attentive both to third-party perceptions of virtuous behavior as well as to the virtuous agent's own perceptions, since situational perception involves such complicated assessments.

Again, Third, one of the primary difficulties in experimental studies is attempting to determine which agents are, in fact, virtuous, since these people are presumably the ones who should be examined to see how their dispositions resist situational coercion. In the Princeton study of seminarians by Darley and Batson (1973), the experimenters tried to find virtuous participants to determine how the situational factor of degree of hurry would affect their virtuous behavior, yet it is highly dubious that merely being a seminarian means that a person is actually virtuous. The experiment relies, though, on the participants actually being virtuous; otherwise, the results of the study could merely be explained by the dismissive response that the seminarians' behavior was predicted by

the fact that none (or very few) of them were actually virtuous at the outset. If such is the case, then why *would* we actually expect the seminarians to stop to offer assistance, since we would not expect helping behavior from the vicious agent? In future experiments, experimenters should be more attentive to ascertaining how virtuous participants have demonstrated themselves to be in the past, since this measure may assist in choosing participants who are actually virtuous. Perhaps this goal could be achieved by seeking the testimony of close friends or family about particular virtuous behaviors that seem to be sustained over time. In this regard, Kamtekar (2004) indicates the following about the assessment of moral agents:

Although knowing how someone has behaved in the past doesn't allow us to predict accurately whether she will behave in the same way in a particular instance, it does enable us to predict accurately how much more likely she is to behave in this way than are other people whose past behavior was different. (p. 476)

Again, though, virtue may only allow, as Kamtekar suggests, for prediction on the level of probability over the behavior of less virtuous agents, rather than point predictions about single behaviors on a single occasion.

It should be clear from the suggestions presented in this section and the last that virtue is a factor that is *extremely* difficult to conceptualize and successfully measure and assess in an experimental setting. It may be that experimental work that is truly helpful in aiding understanding of situations and their interactions with traits will be much less rigorously scientific than is usually expected in experimental psychology. Psychologists may need to content themselves with large-scale, longitudinal research

that is subject to confounds in order to gain some handle on the sorts of situations that are conducive to producing virtue and those that are not. Ideally, as psychologists continue to consider means of assessing situations and their interactions with virtues, additional understanding will emerge about what sorts of environmental features moral agents should be aware of and how they can best allow dispositional factors to interact with environmental factors. In this spirit, the next section will assess what productive insights specifically for virtue ethics may be gained from the conversation between situationists and dispositionists. What sort of advice has this conversation offered for improving moral agents' attempts to be virtuous?

Constructive Outcomes for Virtue Ethics

Aristotle himself seems to have, at least limitedly, recognized that virtue is intimately interactive with and responsive to situations (Aristotle, trans. 1999, 1106b17-24). What the situationist criticism re-asserts is the importance of understanding virtuous behavior as occurring in a context in which virtuous dispositions must necessarily interact dynamically with situations. This reminder is necessary, since it is true that virtue ethicists have often talked about the importance of forming dispositions that are more robust than should be expected. Given the importance of balancing attention to both character and situation, virtue theorists should extend discussion of moral formation further into advice for constructing environments conducive to virtuous behavior. In what particular ways could people attend both to situations and to dispositions in order to facilitate virtuous behavior?

One important response that situationism raises is an awareness of humanity's tendency to commit the Fundamental Attribution Error (Appiah, 2008, p. 42). Doris

(2002) explains that the Fundamental Attribution Error describes people's inclination "to inflate the importance of dispositions and neglect the importance of situations in explaining behavior....Inevitably there are uncertainties and controversies, but the phenomenon is among the best documented in personality and social psychology....Stereotyping is the most obvious problem" (p. 93). The Fundamental Attribution Error occurs when people mistakenly attribute behavior only to a person's character, when the person's action is actually caused by the complex interaction of character and situation. The Fundamental Attribution Error is so called, because people seem to chronically overemphasize the importance of character, while simultaneously under-appreciating the role of the environment.

Such overattribution of behavior to personality factors is a common practice, likely because such stereotyping of character saves cognitive resources. It is easier on a cognitive level to draw a strong link between behavior and character than it is to devote deliberative resources to considering behavior as the complex interaction of diverse personality and situation factors. Doris (2002) confirms that "since revision often requires greater cognitive resources than the original attribution, we will have difficulty correcting overattributions, especially in cases where 'cognitive load' imposed by other stimuli drains resources from person perception" (p. 104). Because many environmental factors press for the a moral agent's attention, a natural consequence seems to be that the human cognitive apparatus is ingrained with the tendency to commit the Fundamental Attribution Error to protect its cognitive capabilities.

Although, such an orientation may be the ordinary mode of perceiving for moral agents in the West, there does seem to be hope that "Given the right sort of critical apparatus,

Westerners might be able to more frequently correct their 'default' overattributions" (Doris, 2002, p. 106). Thus, as moral agents become more attentive to their tendency to attribute other people's behavior to dispositional causes, they may be able to correct this perception and make themselves more attentive to situational causes of behavior which may enhance ethical deliberation and action.

Awareness of humanity's tendency to commit the Fundamental Attribution Error should make moral agents very careful when assessing another person's character. Individual actions do not generally adequately represent a person's character. People should try to be increasingly attentive to situational effects on behavior, so that when they consider the reasons for a person's actions, they will be increasingly compassionate. Compassion will derive from the realization that the other person's actions may have been considerably skewed by powerful circumstantial factors that he does not even recognize as operating on him. Realization that someone probably acted the way she did largely because she was in a hurry or because she was tired or because a family member had just died may facilitate more virtuous behavior in the observer, by increasing empathy and making people less likely to condemn others for acting from "bad character."

In addition to drawing attention to incorrect assessments deriving from the Fundamental Attribution Error, situationism has suggested two other particular ways in which moral agents ought to be particularly careful when assessing the actions of others. The first problem of assessing behavior is "negativity bias." This describes the situation in which "negative behaviors seem to be weighted more heavily in evaluation, so that people are more likely to make dispositional inference when observing a negative

behavior than a positive one” (Doris, 2002, 98). Thus, moral agents tend to attribute seemingly inappropriate behavior to character, while they may tend to attribute good behavior to situational factors. Moral agents ought to cultivate an awareness of this negativity bias, so that when observing inappropriate behavior of others, they will be particularly sensitive to situational causes of behavior.

The second problem that inhibits proper assessment of behavior is “confirmation bias.” Confirmation bias describes the tendency to “weight disproportionately confirmations (relative to disconfirmations) of person judgments we have already made” (Flanagan, 1991, p. 284). When assessing other people’s behavior, moral agents tend to lend cognitive weight to factors that confirm previous assessments. Such a realization of the natural tendencies of our cognitive machinery should urge us to particularly attend to instances of behavior that do not fit our stereotypes of others’ character. By lending due attention to the human tendency to commit the Fundamental Attribution Error and to be subject to negativity and confirmation biases, it may be possible to tune the cognitive apparatus of moral agents to allow more proper assessment of morally relevant action.

Aristotle himself suggested intentional compensation for natural predilections. He suggested directing attention to “what we ourselves drift into easily” (1109b2). Having identified such tendencies (presumably including the Fundamental Attribution Error), “we must drag ourselves off in the contrary direction; for if we pull far away from error, as they do in straightening bent wood, we shall reach the intermediate condition” (Aristotle, 1109b6-8). Effort at intentionally overriding entrenched

virtuous character (Apostel, 2008, pp. 76-72; Doris, 2002, pp. 89-91,) to Aristotle,

tendencies is a worthy object of further experimental research to determine the efficacy of such attempts.

Another important realization that situationism has offered to virtue ethics is that virtuous people have the ability to choose the situations in which they will place themselves. By lending conscious awareness to prudently choosing one's environment, a moral agent can facilitate the possibility of acting in accord with their virtuous dispositions, as they interact with situations. Instead of insisting that virtuous character should be able to override all situational factors, the moral agent should exercise practical wisdom to discern which situations contribute to virtuous action. Accordingly, Doris (2002) advises, "The way to achieve the ethically desirable result is to recognize that situational pressures may all too easily overwhelm character and avoid the dangerous situation" (p. 147). Thus, situationism rightly warns that situational factors may have profound effects on virtuous behavior and that moral agents are thus right to be extremely cautious, where possible, to choose environments that will facilitate virtuous activity, rather than those that will encourage vice.

Although moral agents have some freedom to choose the situations they will inhabit, there is another lesson to be learned from situationism at this juncture. If moral agents or whole societies become devoted to encouraging virtuous behavior, they may be able to structure the environment in ways that will be conducive to the expression of virtuous behavior. Many social psychologists, trait theorists, and virtue ethicists seem to agree that virtue ethics ought to place more emphasis on the formation of social and legal environments, instead of placing the entire burden of moral behavior on ingrained virtuous character (Appiah, 2008, pp. 70-72; Doris, 2002, pp. 89-91, 146; Kamtekar,

2004, p. 490; Wielenberg, 2006, p. 490). Such concern for regulation of environments seems to find natural congruence with Aristotle's connection of ethics and politics. Aristotle seems to have recognized that proper friendships, political, and social arrangements were exceedingly important, even necessary, for truly virtuous behavior (see *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 10, Chapter 9). Although Doris (2002) does not attempt to describe how such formation of one's environment might practically occur (p. 90), Kamtekar (2004) offers the following more particular direction for the formation of environments conducive to the expression of virtue:

An intelligent practical response to the situationist findings is to identify the factors in one's environment that support the behavior one wants and then to see to the preservation of these factors. Ancient virtue ethicists do not ignore this kind of recommendation—for example, many comment on how much our friends and associates influence what we are willing to do and urge us to attend to whom we associate with. (p. 490)

Correspondingly, even if moral agents have not yet learned how to manipulate the environment to facilitate virtuous behavior, there seems to be considerable agreement that directed cognitive awareness of the effects of situational factors can cause significant improvements in virtuous behavior (Doris, 2002, p. 148, 153; Flanagan, 1991, p. 313, 334; Appiah, 2008, p. 49, 71). This sort of cognitive awareness corresponds interestingly to the requirement of practical wisdom that Aristotle thinks is necessary for a person to be truly virtuous. Practical wisdom includes the ability to discern important aspects of one's environment and to respond to these factors from a virtuous character. By understanding which situations will present significant

challenges to the virtuous agent, individuals can more intentionally direct attention to acting virtuously despite situational factors that would attempt to prevent such activity. A particular example of how such attention might be directed is offered by Appiah (2008), who suggests that in view of Darley and Batson's study of Princeton seminarians, a person might respond in the following manner: "Each time she sees someone who needs help when she's hurrying to a meeting, she'll remember those Princeton seminarians and tell herself that, after all, she's not in that much of a hurry—that the others can wait" (p. 49). This sort of attention to particular experimental results can cooperate with directed awareness of one's mood and the effects of one's social group to counteract negative situational effects. By cultivating regular attention to situational factors, a person can become a more integrated agent, drawing his character back into a unity, despite the many situational forces that threaten to tear his moral agency apart. External forces tend to exert external control over a person, and it is her job to bring action back under the control of internal mechanisms of ethical deliberation (Korsgaard, 2009).

Another practical way of drawing together and understanding one's capacity as a moral agent is to cognitively investigate how one would want to respond in hypothetical situations that would present some difficulty for acting virtuously. Such theorizing is motivated by the conviction that preparation for such situations will prepare the agent to act more appropriately, since she will have had a chance to consider the situation when not under the influence of those particular situational pressures. Kamtekar (2004) describes such contemplation of hypothetical situations as "not mere daydreaming about heroism but thinking in detail through all of the possible features of

your situation and all of the consequences of a particular action you might do in response to these features” (pp. 487-488). Such contemplation will allow for a certain degree of preparation for circumstances that might otherwise “startle” the agent into vicious action.

Kamtekar’s suggestion of cognitive preparation for challenging circumstances corresponds to Walter Mischel’s (2009) suggestion that moral agents may train what he calls “hot and cool emotional systems.” These systems differentiate between deliberation that occurs when a person is under situational pressure to make a snap decision (governed by the hot system) versus deliberation when the person has time to evaluate one’s action (governed by the cool system). Mischel surmises that intentional training “may be used to influence the interaction of the hot and cool systems to overcome the power of stimulus control, as people attempt to purposefully prevent powerful stimuli from eliciting their impulsive, immediate responses and dispositional vulnerabilities” (p. 288). Early deliberation and the training of these emotional systems can prevent situational forces for disintegrating a person’s coherence as a moral agent.

At this point, it is appropriate to again emphasize the dynamic interaction between traits and situations by suggesting that the above suggestions for attending to situations are underwritten by the desire to develop personality. Development of personality can help form moral integrity that helps prevent distortion by situational factors. Several authors offer experimental research that indicates the possibility of personality and trait development throughout the entire human lifespan (Fleeson & Nofle, 2009, p. 153; Roberts & Walton, 2006, p. 21). Such development may focus on organizing one’s cognitive structure such that the agent is attuned to morally relevant

features of one's environment. Hill and Lapsely (2009) suggest such formation of moral capacities:

Chronically accessible moral schemas provide a dispositional readiness to discern the moral dimensions of experience. These categories would be online, easily primed, and easily activated to help the individual discern the meaning of events, notice the moral dimensions of experience, and interpret events in light of one's moral commitments. (p. 245)

Experimental evidence suggests that such trained attention could occur throughout a person's lifespan, lending credence to Aristotle's claim that development of virtue is the process of a lifetime of habituation, training, and guidance by more virtuous exemplars.

Wrapping Up Virtue

This chapter has offered evidence demonstrating that the personality structures necessary to support the virtues are indeed found in moral agents. At the same time, this chapter has stressed the importance of situations in producing behavior. It is important to remember that both situations and disposition have important roles in determining behavior, yet experimentally it is a futile endeavor to try to separate the influence of situation from the role of traits. Situations interact in complex ways with virtuous dispositions; in fact, dispositions *always* occur in situations and are thus always dynamically interacting with them. In other words, situations affect the expression of virtues and regulate which virtues are formed, while personality factors also form situations and allow the moral agent to choose which situations to encounter.

Experimental psychology tries to assess personality trait structures and situations through observable behaviors or written measures, but it faces significant challenges in

attempting to determine the separate roles of situation or personality in producing virtuous behavior.

Attention to the findings of situationism has provided constructive suggestions for forming virtuous dispositions and for creating environments that are themselves conducive to virtue. Particularly, virtue ethicists have reason to consider the profound importance of situations and to understand dispositions in narrower terms than they often have. In the final chapter, I will consider the implications of this dialogue between experimental psychology and philosophical virtue ethics for Christian spiritual formation, which is characteristically linked with Aristotelian and Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics.

My earlier understanding of virtue said locates it centrally in the moral and spiritual life of the Christian. Since Aquinas, Christians have continued to conceptualize spiritual formation in ways that evidence considerable continuity with Aristotle. Dallas Willard, Richard Fester, and James Wilton are three such contemporary voices contemplating the process of spiritual formation. This chapter will focus primarily on their conceptualizations of spiritual formation, showing their continuity with Aristotle. Finally, if spiritual formation does maintain considerable connection with Aristotle's conception of virtue ethics, then the conversation between situationists and dispositionists should offer a significant contribution to our understanding of the process of spiritual formation.

Christian spiritual formation is often a rather nebulous concept. What does it mean to form one's spiritual capacities? Dallas Willard and Don Simpson (2005) describe the goal of spiritual formation in the following manner:

Spiritual formation for the Christian refers to the *Holy Spirit-driven* process

of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself. To the degree spiritual formation in Christ is successful, the outer life of the individual becomes a natural expression.

Chapter 4: Applications in Spiritual Formation

Introduction

Since the 13th century writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, a strong link has maintained between Aristotle's systematization of ethics in terms of the virtues and the Christian process of spiritual formation. Aquinas formed a crucial link between Aristotle and Christianity in his *Summa Theologica*, in which he appropriates an essentially Aristotelian understanding of virtue and locates it centrally in the moral and spiritual life of the Christian. Since Aquinas, Christians have continued to conceptualize spiritual formation in ways that evidence considerable continuity with Aristotle. Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, and James Wilhoit are three such contemporary voices contemplating the process of spiritual formation. This chapter will focus primarily on their conceptualizations of spiritual formation, showing their continuity with Aristotle. Finally, if spiritual formation does maintain considerable connection with Aristotle's conception of virtue ethics, then the conversation between situationists and dispositionists should offer a significant contribution to our understanding of the process of spiritual formation.

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of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself. To the degree spiritual formation in Christ is successful, the outer life of the individual becomes a natural expression of the character and teaching of Jesus. (p. 16)

Richard Foster (1998) provides additional perspective on the purpose of the spiritual disciplines, which he alternately suggests is “spiritual growth” (p. 8), “the total transformation of the person” (p. 62), “joy” (p. 193), and “freedom” (p. 110). James Wilhoit (2008) offers a slightly different perspective, suggesting that “Christian spiritual formation refers to the intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit” (p. 23). All three authors suggest that spiritual formation involves important change in the nature of humans. Spiritual formation effects a change that is so profound that it transfigures the entire person, changing her being “all the way down.” The transformation which is the goal of spiritual formation effects personality, emotions, cognitive processes, and all other levels of the self (even including body and soul, if one is willing to make the distinction). Such transformation aims at changing people from a sinful state of disobedience, vice, idolatry, and narcissism into a person who is characteristically like Christ.

Such formation seems to require that the Incarnation of Jesus Christ remain central to spiritual formation. Christianity affirms that in the Incarnation, Christ exemplifies what it means to be perfectly human. By becoming truly human, God affirms the goodness of the body and shows what humanity should attempt to become. Of course, it is important to respect the ontological difference that will always exist

between God and humanity; Christians do not actually strive to become God. Instead, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians are invited to participate in the Triune life of God: a life of love, community, and holiness. Spiritual formation, then, describes the process by which Christians try to become, through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, part of God's Triune life. In this endeavor, the spiritual disciplines must always remain fundamentally Christocentric (Foster, 1998, p. 111).

While Christian spiritual formation does emphasize the importance of recognizing that humans are more than the physical matter of which they are composed, it also recognizes that the body itself plays a crucial role in the holistic transformation of the person (Willard, 1988, p. 68, 75). To assist progress toward the end of bringing the whole person into conformity with the life and death of Christ, a number of spiritual disciplines have traditionally been agreed to facilitate this transformation of character. Meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration are twelve spiritual disciplines that Christians have historically recognized as useful in holistic transformation (see Foster & Griffin, 2000). These practices are supposed to form dispositions that will result in holy actions that proceed from transformed character. Thus, "*to mature in spiritual formation means to love God with all of the heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love one's neighbor as oneself*" (Willard & Simpson, 2005, p. 26). Love for God and the transformed character that accompanies such love must occur simultaneously with the incarnating of love in the form of service to others.

It is no small point that spiritual formation occurs at the level of the holistic person, which centrally includes the body (Willard, 1988, p. 76). While Willard, Foster,

and Wilhoit all try to make abundantly clear that they recognize the importance of the body, they at times seem to have difficulty balancing the spiritual and bodily concerns so as to utterly avoid accusations of Gnosticism (Willard, 1988, p. 67). Bishop Kallistos Ware (1995), a writer about spiritual formation in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, contends that “In ‘spiritualizing’ the body, [humanity] does not thereby dematerialize it: on the contrary, it is the human vocation to manifest the spiritual *in and through the material*. Christians are in this sense the only true materialists” (p. 50).

Although some inconsistency in complete affirmation of the importance of the body leads to some uncertainty, Willard, Foster, Wilhoit, and certainly Ware all do finally affirm that physicality is inextricably bound part of the spiritual concerns of the spiritual disciplines. Willard (1988) expresses evidence of such concern for the body in the following manner:

Human personality is not separable in our consciousness from the human body. And that fact is expressed by asserting the IDENTITY of the person with his or her body. This fact is what makes it necessary for us to make our bodies, through the disciplines for the spiritual life, our primary focus of effort in our part in the process of redemption. (p. 84)

Stressing the centrality of the body in spiritual formation prevents spiritual formation from becoming some disembodied exercise emphasizing the ethereal, mystical, and transcendent. Instead, spiritual formation should have profoundly apparent effects on human personality and activity.

Additionally, denotation of these practices as “disciplines” implicitly indicates that human volition and action are crucially important in furthering the process of

transformation. Contemporary advocates of spiritual formation contend that human action must be understood as happening in conjunction with and by the enabling of the Holy Spirit (Willard, 1988, p. 77). If both the enabling of the Holy Spirit and the contribution of humans are not both recognized as operative in spiritual formation, either of two problematic perspectives may emerge. Either people may understand character transformation as attainable merely by human effort or such formation may become a work of God alone, in which humans cannot participate. Both of these perspectives should be recognized as unfaithful. Willard comments that “We...learn by experience that the harmonization of our total self with God will not be done *for* us. *We* must act” (p. 68). Ware (1995) concurs that “We are to hold in balance two complementary truths: without God’s grace we *can* do nothing; but without our voluntary co-operation God *will* do nothing” (p. 112). Thus, the Christian life cannot be characterized by passivity and inactivity that relies entirely on God’s supernatural action in the physical world. Such realization of humanity’s need to facilitate the transformation of their character provides a natural link to the ethical concerns that have previously been of focal concern.

Virtue, Situations, and Spiritual Formation

According to this characterization of spiritual formation, some congruence with virtue ethics should be obvious. Spiritual formation is a process that occurs over the whole lifespan; it requires considerable effort, time, and practice; and it focuses on the transformation of human personality (Willard, 1988, p. 70; Ware, 1995, p. 62; Wilhoit, 2008, p. 23). Spiritual formation also includes proper formation of habits that will presumably result in virtuous character that will “automatically” produce correct actions

(Willard, 1988, p. 114, 117). Part of spiritual formation also involves the transformation of “natural impulses” and the “motivation, organization, and direction of our physical existence” (Willard, p. 115). Instead of being under the reign of sinful impulses, spiritual formation teaches the process of forming character from which proper action, emotion, and feeling will naturally proceed (Willard, p. 151; Ware, p. 115; Willard & Simpson, p. 101).

Christians affirm that human nature is naturally inclined to idolatry and self-service; through spiritual formation, even the emotions come into proper alignment so that “The passions, then, are to be purified, not killed; to be educated, not eradicated....On the level of the body they are purified above all through fasting and abstinence, through frequent prostrations during the time of prayer” (Ware, p. 116). Such control of the passions “means that we are no longer dominated by selfishness and uncontrolled desire, and so we become capable of true love” (Ware, p. 117). The importance of bringing the passions under proper control is also emphasized by the Protestant tradition (Foster, 1998, p. 33). Thus, spiritual formation follows a similar approach to the formation of the virtues and has similar goals to moral education. Importantly, both spiritual formation and virtue ethics are intent upon the formation of personality for the purpose of producing right behavior.

Attaining virtuous character and the good action that proceeds from it is an important goal of spiritual formation. Thus, the constructive advice that the research and debate over situationism offers in improving moral formation also holds for spiritual formation. The virtuous life seems to be attendant to the proper working of spiritual formation. As has been considered at length in the previous chapter, one of the

primary contributions of situationism is a reinforced attention to and concern for environmental factors that had previously been marginalized in understanding behavior. Thus, because situations interact dynamically with personality and because the personality is of a central site of spiritual transformation, situations also play a crucial role in spiritual formation.

One of the most important lessons to learn from social psychology is that “The most influential situational factors concern our relationships with others” (Reis, 2009, p. 266). As demonstrated by the power of group effects, people are perhaps the most important, ubiquitous, and complex factors of situations. Spiritual formation advisors do seem to recognize the important roles of social forces and other people in Christian formation (Willard, 1988, p. 111; Willard & Simpson, 2005, p. 32, 85). Wilhoit (2008) even stresses, “I have described it [spiritual formation] as communal because the Christian life is best lived in community” (p. 23); yet Willard and Foster do not seem locate community as centrally as Wilhoit does in their definitions of spiritual formation. Willard (1988) questions, “How can individual human beings be brought to a place where the social structures ...no longer expect them to do things that are wrong? Individual change *is* the answer, even though many believe strongly the answer lies in social change” (pp. 232-233). He goes on to warn that it is dangerous to aim at social change without first having such change be motivated from transformed individual lives (Willard, 1988, p. 238).

Certainly, it is important to stress the transformation of the self, yet spiritual formation literature often seems to teeter on the brink of detrimental internalism, at times falling headlong into narrowly self-focused exercises. Because humans are

inherently social creatures and because the Church ought to be centrally located in spiritual formation, communal aspects of spiritual formation must be stressed in a way that they often have not previously been (at least in the Protestant tradition). People are formative elements of our environments and spiritual formation must attend to incorporating others into the process of spiritual formation. The implications of such a widening of the scope of spiritual formation should encourage individuals to begin to understand their formation as properly proceeding from their situation in the life of the church. Situational factors external to the Christian, such as the liturgy, sacraments, communal prayer, and proclamation of the gospel: all of these communal activities have a powerful role in spiritual formation. Renewed emphasis must be placed on them in the context of current directions for spiritual formation, which often neglect substantial emphasis on the power of these communal situational factors in transforming human character.

One of the ways that such situational factors become so powerful is the way they incorporate the Christian into the narrative of fall, life, death, and resurrection. As the Christian participates in the life of the Church, the Church should be incorporating the Christian into the narrative of the Kingdom of God. As virtue theorists have noted, ethics is powerfully shaped by personal history and a person's narrative (this, of course, is one of the things that makes virtue difficult to measure in an experimental context). Wilhoit (2008) similarly acknowledges the importance of narrative, commenting, "An important moment in spiritual formation comes when we link 'my story' with the 'our story' of the church universal and understand that we are part of something far larger than ourselves" (p. 117). For Foster, attention to scripture holds a special role in

conforming our lives to the Christian narrative (Foster, 1998, p. 187). Foster is right to stress the role of the gospel, but he emphasizes individual appropriation of scripture in the context of prayerful reading and meditation. Situationism urges us to recognize the importance of public proclamation of the gospel, for such proclamation allows the narrative of God's Kingdom to break in on our own self-focused narratives, disrupting our sinful patterns of self-referential thinking.

When spiritual formation comes to be understood as properly located in and proceeding from the life of the Church, situationism, as might be expected, suggests that the church attend to incorporating situational factors into its regular patterns of worship. What are some of these factors to which the Church should lend increased attention? One commonly recognized factor in spiritual formation is physical posture while praying or worshipping (Foster, 1998, p. 28, 169; St. Ignatius of Loyola, 2007, p. 48, 123; Wilhoit, 2008, p. 99). If our bodies truly are to be incorporated into the process of spiritual formation, kneeling, standing, sitting, genuflection, and dancing are all elements that should powerfully shape thoughts, passions, and character. Wherever possible, the body's role should be recognized in spiritual formation, with the result that all of the senses be engaged in the life of the church. Incense, the Eucharistic elements, holy water, visual arts, and music are all material, situational factors that should be recognized as powerfully able to affect the way people act and therefore also able to transform their characters. Recognizing the sacramental character of our material environments should broaden our understanding of the contexts in which spiritual formation can and should occur.

the sacramental importance of architecture, Beas (2016) offers the following

Yet it would be wrong to suggest that spiritual formation only happens in the experience of communal worship in the context of particular churches. Wilhoit (2008) suggests that the process of spiritual formation should extend into the rest of our lives, in a way that has considerable resonances with the advice of virtue ethics. He explains:

Spiritual formation does not take place primarily in small groups and Sunday school classes; instead, it mostly takes place in the well-lived and everyday events of our life. Our small groups, retreats, and studies should help us respond wisely to the events of life that form us. (p. 38)

Recognition of the importance of people, the life of the Church, and the sacramental quality of everyday life allows for spiritual formation to permeate every area of life, contributing to the deconstruction of the frequent bifurcation between sacred and secular.

A further way in which the sacred may be understood as breaking in on the material is in the context of the built environment. Philip Bess (2006) offers an insightful vision of the way in which Aristotelian concepts of virtue and Catholic understandings of sacramentality can cooperate to inform the way that cities and churches are constructed. Bess comments that “What religious believers may or may not often think about is that both space and the objects that define and occupy it are always at least potentially sacramental” (pp. 68-69). The Protestant Church has, since the Reformation, tended to eschew what it perceived as architectural and aesthetic extravagance. Such ire against “visual spectacle” has often encouraged austerity in the architectural structure of churches and in their aesthetic adornment. In an effort to revive the sacramental importance of architecture, Bess (2006) offers the following six

aspects of architecture as relevant to forming ecclesiastical environments that participate in the process of spiritual formation:

- 1) A sense of verticality, anthropologically grounded in our two-legged nature as *homo erectus*, in which height (e.g., towers, domes, and naves) and/or depth (e.g., tombs, grottos, and crypts) are accorded sacred significance.
- 2) Concern for light (and shadow), as emblematic of the immateriality of the sacred.
- 3) Care for and delight in craftsmanship, durability, and material particularity—all properly indicative of both the intrinsic, created, ‘imminent’ goodness of material things and their sacramental, redeemed, ‘transcendent’ potential.
- 4) The conscious employment of mathematic or geometric systems as ordering devices emblematic of the ‘structure’ of the natural order and its rootedness in the sacred.
- 5) The aspiration to achieve a compositional and artistic unity, whether simple or complex.
- 6) Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a sense of hierarchy: of sacred things (even if they are ‘plain’ and ‘ordinary’ things, sanctified) being in either their grandeur or their humility exceptional. One might summarize all this by saying that sacred architecture seems usually intended to be more or less *monumental*. (pp. 73-74)

These ways of carefully planning the built environment implicitly concur with the situationist contention that situations are important for determining how people act and what sort of people they will end up being. If the situationists are right, even partially,

then we should be very conscious of how we construct spaces for worship. These spaces have profound and holistic effects on our character. Concern for these aspects of architectural design will assist Christians in recognizing the embodied nature of their spirituality, facilitating worship and enhancing the proclamation of the gospel. All of these factors serve to situate Christians properly in the gospel narrative, so that they will be able to become like the central figure of that narrative, God incarnate, Jesus Christ.

The implicit desire of dispositionists, personality theorists, and advocates of spiritual formation has often been to try to wish that behavior could somehow be made independent of situations. From this analysis, we should conclude that such a goal is neither possible nor desirable. Dispositions must occur in situations, yet those situations are plastic and may be molded by dispositions. Christians should be attentive to beneficial ways of forming the environment that will be conducive to virtuous activity, the forming of virtuous dispositions, and the corresponding process of spiritual formation.

Certainly, the goal of both virtue ethics and spiritual formation is to form the agent in such a way that she will be able to resist situations that undesirably shape her identity and activity. The Church should certainly be part of character formation, enabling people to resist the effects of such situations. At the same time, the Church should respect the power of these situations and their profound effects on behavior, and it should use carefully chosen environments to form character appropriately and to influence behavior.

The great saints of the church provide role models of people who have, under substantial situational duress, remained faithful, unitary agents. They provide hope that

other Christians may learn from them and follow in their example. To this end, Christians should be more attentive to situational influence as they try to become integrated persons, moral agents, and faithful disciples. Becoming attentive to the power of situations should allow people to become more discriminating about which situations will be beneficial for their formation (as in the Church) and which situations will require special care, attention, and motivation to resist. Along with Aristotle, Christians should stress the importance of gaining practical wisdom that will allow them behavior to be attentive to nuances of situations (Aristotle, trans. 1999, 1144b32-33). Understanding the role of situational factors provides hope that our lives may be marked by integrity and unity amidst the complexities of a broken world.

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