

Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Situationist social psychologists tell us that information about people's distinctive character traits, opinions, attitudes, values, or past behavior is not as useful for determining what they will do as is information about the details of their situations.¹ One would expect, they say, that the possessor of a given character trait (such as helpfulness) would behave consistently (helpfully) across situations that are similar in calling for the relevant (helping) behavior, but under experimental conditions, people's behavior is not found to be cross-situationally consistent (the likelihood that a person who has behaved helpfully on one occasion will behave helpfully on the next is hardly above chance).² Instead, across a range of situations, the person's behavior tends to converge on the behavioral norm for those situations. So situationists reason that people's situations, rather than their characters, are the explanatorily powerful factors in determining why different people behave differently. They add that if behavior does not covary with character traits, then ordinary people, "folk psychologists" who try to explain and predict

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1. See Lee Ross and Richard E. Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), pp. 2–6.

2. Correlations between a type of behavior in one situation and another situation calling for the same behavior were found to lie between .1 and .2; see *ibid.*, pp. 94–100.

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people's behaviors by their characters rather than their situations, routinely commit a "fundamental attribution error."³

Recently some moral philosophers have argued that situationist social psychology has radical implications for moral philosophy.⁴ For example, Gilbert Harman suggests that the psychologists' research calls into question not only folk psychology but also virtue ethics.⁵ For, Harman's argument goes, a character trait is a "relatively stable and long-term disposition to act in distinctive ways," but "empirical studies designed to test whether people behave differently in ways that might reflect their having different character traits have failed to find relevant differences."⁶ Thus, "ordinary attributions of character-traits to people may be deeply misguided, and it may even be the case that there is no such thing as character."⁷ And "if there is no such thing as character, then there is no such thing as character building."⁸ So, Harman concludes, moral philosophers ought to abandon character-based virtue ethics.⁹

Less incendiary and perhaps more illuminating is John Doris's formulation of the issues. According to Doris, the social psychology research shows, first, that our dispositions to distinctive behaviors are narrow rather than broad—our behavior is consistent in very similar situations but not across the range of what would be thought to be trait-

3. *Ibid.*, p. 4. Ross and Nisbett call ordinary or lay psychology 'folk psychology'; in this context, the reference is not to all belief-and-desire talk, dubbed 'folk psychology' by philosophers of mind, but rather to explanations of behavior by means of some intrinsic property of the agent. The parallel is with folk (i.e., Aristotelian) physics, according to which the behavior of a heavy body is explained by its intrinsic properties (a tendency to fall to the earth) alone.

4. This article does not discuss the pioneering work of Owen Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991). This is because while Flanagan thinks that empirical work in psychology, including work in the situationist tradition, constrains moral philosophy, he does not draw the conclusion about situationism's radical implications for moral philosophy with which the article is concerned.

5. Gilbert Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error," in his *Explaining Value and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 165–78.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 166. Similarly, John Doris argues that in order to attribute character traits to people, we require evidence that their behavior is cross-situationally consistent, but a study of the experimental data "typically reveals failures of cross-situational consistency." See John Doris, "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics," *Noûs* 32 (1998): 504–30; for the denial of cross-situational consistency, see pp. 506–7.

7. Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology," p. 165.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 176. In response to such criticisms of virtue ethics, and on the assumption that situationist social psychology is true, Maria Merritt is developing a virtue ethics that depends only on the sort of stability of character that can be sustained by situational contributions; see "Virtue Ethics and Situationist Personality Psychology," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 3 (2000): 365–83.

relevant-behavior-eliciting situations—and, second, that these narrow dispositions are not integrated. Doris's conclusions about the implications for moral philosophy, however, are about the same as Harman's: he reasons that if experimental psychology shows us that the broad dispositions of character-based virtue ethics are not to be had, then moral philosophy should turn away from virtue ethics and seek a moral theory and practical ideals that are possible for creatures like us.¹⁰

In this article, I argue that the character traits conceived of and debunked by situationist social psychological studies have very little to do with character as it is conceived of in traditional virtue ethics.¹¹ Traditional virtue ethics offers a conception of character far superior to the one under attack by situationism; in addition to clarifying the differences, I suggest ways in which social psychology might investigate character on the virtue ethics conception. Briefly, the so-called character traits that the situationist experiments test for are independently functioning dispositions to behave in stereotypical ways, dispositions that are isolated from how people reason. We should not be surprised by evidence that entities such as these are not responsible for much of our behavior. By contrast, the conception of character in virtue ethics is holistic and inclusive of how we reason: it is a person's character as a whole (rather than isolated character traits), that explains her actions, and this character is a more-or-less consistent, more-or-less integrated, set of motivations, including the person's desires, beliefs about the world, and ultimate goals and values. The virtuous character that virtue ethics holds up as an ideal is one in which these motivations are organized so that they do not conflict, but support one another. Such an organization would be an achievement of practical reason, and its behavioral manifestation would be cross-situational consistency (in a sense somewhat different from the situationists'). Traditional virtue ethics explains behavioral inconsistency as a result of the cognitive and motivational obstacles to this achievement of practical reason rather than as the result of the absence of character traits.

This is not to say that the social psychological findings are irrelevant

10. John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

11. By 'traditional virtue ethics', I mean the conception of virtue, and the underlying moral psychology, shared, despite their differences, by Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. The mismatch between the conception of character in traditional virtue ethics and the conception of character in the social psychology literature is noted by Joel Kupperman, in "The Indispensability of Character," *Philosophy* 76 (2001): 239–50, as well as by Gopal Sreenivasan in "Errors about Errors: Virtue Theory and Trait Attribution," *Mind* 111 (2002): 47–68, but neither spells out the virtue ethics conception of character in detail. Julia Annas, in "Virtue Ethics and Social Psychology" (unpublished manuscript, University of Arizona, 2002), says a great deal more about the virtue ethics conception of character.

to virtue ethics, however, for it seems to me that just as empirical social psychology can benefit from considering the superior conception of character in virtue ethics, so too, virtue ethics can benefit from considering the particular situational factors that social psychology suggests have a profound influence on behavior. For the experiments in the situationist tradition teach us that the obstacles to living and acting virtuously are not only the obvious ones, such as temptation and insensitivity to others' feelings, but also, for example, the difficulty of figuring out when to rely on the social cues that usually stand us in good stead and when to break away. In other words, situationist social psychology can help virtue ethics to identify factors, both within the self and within situations that do not wear their moral relevance on their sleeve but nevertheless seem to constrain how we act. So in the last section of the article, I discuss virtue ethics strategies for practical deliberation and self-cultivation in the light of situationist social psychology.

I should also say at the outset that this article is not a defense of our ordinary uses of the notion of character, about which I have reservations. Setting aside for the moment the empirical findings of situationist psychologists, character-based explanations of behavior often look like pseudo-explanations: it is all too easy to go from a possibly projected characterization of an action (it was daring, or thoughtful) to a reification of the characterization (the agent possesses the quality of daringness or thoughtfulness) which supposedly explains the characteristics (daringness or thoughtfulness) of her action. Further, the fact that many of our character attributions have an action-guiding, expressive, or evaluative dimension sometimes seems to undermine their explanatory value (compare 'she always brings her own lunch because she's stingy' and 'she always brings her own lunch because she's frugal'). Then there is the fact that in practice, we often attribute behavior to character traits when for some reason we don't want to understand the behavior in rational terms,¹² or from the agent's point of view ('she's stingy' or 'she's frugal' instead of 'she wants to use the money she saves for such-and-such purpose').¹³ Finally, it can seem that according peo-

12. This may be the thought that underlies Harman's promise that abolition of the notion of character will lead to an increased understanding of how people's behavior is the product of their situations, with the result that we will become more tolerant of others and better able to resolve, e.g., ethnic conflicts (Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology," p. 177).

13. Sartre's analysis and criticism of anti-Semitism might be thought to generalize to all character traits. According to Sartre, "For the anti-Semite, what makes the Jew is the presence in him of 'Jewishness,' a Jewish principle analogous to phlogiston or the soporific virtue of opium . . . a metaphysical essence [without which] the activities ascribed to the Jew would be entirely incomprehensible." See *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken, 1948), pp. 37–38. Sartre points out two problems with explanations invoking phlogiston

ple's characters a major role in what they do can lead us to hold people responsible for behavior that their circumstances have made difficult to avoid. In this article, I will not be able to address all these aspects of our ordinary thinking in terms of character but will focus on how situationist social psychology and virtue ethics conceptualize character and on what reasons we have for preferring and retaining the virtue ethics conception of character.

II. THE EXPERIMENTS

I begin with brief summaries of four much-discussed psychological experiments and their situationist interpretations. Although Harman and Doris say that their arguments are based on hundreds of experiments in the situationist tradition,¹⁴ these are the experiments that figure prominently in their discussions. Two of these experiments have the further advantage of having been carried out on a reasonably large number of subjects.

*Obedience to authority.*¹⁵— Subjects who had agreed to participate in Stanley Milgram's Yale University study on memory and learning were instructed by the experimenter to administer "painful but not dangerous" electrical shocks, in fifteen-volt increments, to a coparticipant (unbeknownst to the subjects, a confederate of the experimenter) for incorrect answers (including no answer) to word-matching questions. In the original experiment, the confederate pounded on the wall at the 300-volt level (labeled 'Extreme Intensity Shock') and stopped answering questions. Twenty-six of forty subjects continued to shock the confederate all the way up to the end of the scale (450 volts, labeled 'XXX'), while fourteen broke off between 300 volts and the end. (Pre-experiment predictions were that only 0–3 percent would go all the way.) Subjects who protested were instructed by the experimenter to go on, with increasingly forceful verbal prods: "Please continue"; "the experiment requires that you continue"; "it is absolutely essential that you continue"; "you have no other choice, you must go on." Subjects who inquired

or the soporific virtue: first, these are entities cooked up to explain a particular range of behaviors and are nonexplanatory for anything else; second, and more important, this mode of explanation assimilates a person to an event in the natural world, rather than making sense of his freedom—the anti-Semite needs the metaphysical essence to make the activities ascribed to the Jew comprehensible because he refuses to engage in a rational understanding of the Jew as another human being. But I do not believe that such an opposition between character-based and rational understanding is necessary.

14. Doris, *Lack of Character*, p. 13; Gilbert Harman, "No Character or Personality," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 13 (2003): 87–94.

15. The original experiments are reported in Stanley Milgram, "Behavioral Study of Obedience," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67 (1963): 371–78. Repetitions of and variations on these experiments are discussed in Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

about the painfulness of the shocks were told by the experimenter that the shocks might be painful but would result in no permanent tissue damage; subjects who said that the learner did not want to continue were told by the experimenter that whether the learner liked it or not, he must go on until he had learned all the word-matches correctly.

Commenting on this experiment, Harman asks, “can we really attribute a 2 to 1 majority response to a character defect? And what about the fact that *all* subjects were willing to go at least to the 300-volt level? Does *everyone* have this character defect?”¹⁶ Harman prefers the situationist explanation provided by social psychologists Lee Ross and Richard Nisbett: subjects found it difficult to make the transition from their intention to terminate the experiment (expressed by their protests) to actual termination; they could not justify drawing a line between the unobjectionable earliest shock and the higher levels of shock given that the shock level was increased at regular increments; subjects simply could not make sense of their experience.¹⁷

*Good Samaritans.*¹⁸—Princeton Theological Seminary students were initially asked to identify themselves as interested in religion either as a means, for example to salvation; or as an end in itself; or as a quest for meaning in life. (On the situationist interpretation, these self-descriptions constitute the character variable.) Next, they were asked to participate in a study on the vocational careers of seminary students. They read either a passage about seminary students’ new vocational alternatives to ministry or the parable of the Good Samaritan from the Bible. (This was the first situational variable.) After this, they were told that they were to give a talk that would be recorded in the next building. At this point some subjects were told that they should hurry, since they were expected to have been at the venue for the talk a few minutes ago; others were told that they should go right over; still others were told it would be a few minutes before they were expected. (This was the second

16. Harman, “Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology,” p. 171.

17. Ross and Nisbett, pp. 56–58. Milgram, in “Behavioral Study of Obedience,” himself explains experimental subjects’ extremely high level of obedience by the following features of the experimental situation: Yale University’s institutional authority, the experiment’s apparently worthy goal of advancing knowledge, the subject’s voluntary submission to the experiment and perceived obligation to aid the experimenter, the subject’s perception that it was by chance that he was in the role of teacher (administering shocks) and the coparticipant in the role of learner (experiencing the shocks), vagueness about the prerogatives of psychologists versus the rights of experimental subjects, the subject’s belief that the shocks were painful but not dangerous, and the coparticipant’s apparent willingness to continue the experiment up to the 300 volt level (indicated by his answering questions).

18. John M. Darley and C. Daniel Batson, “‘From Jerusalem to Jericho’: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 27 (1973): 100–108.

situational variable.) On their way to the next building, subjects encountered a person slumped in a doorway, head down, coughing and groaning. No correlation was found between students' religious goals and whether they helped this person or not,¹⁹ but there was a strong correlation between subjects' offers to help and their beliefs about how much time they had. Help was offered by 40 percent of all subjects (i.e., sixteen of the forty subjects). Sixty-three percent of those with a few minutes to spare (five out of eight) helped; as did 45 percent of those who had been told to "go right over" (ten out of twenty-two) and 10 percent of those who had been told they were already late (one out of ten).²⁰ There was also some correlation between the rate at which subjects offered to help and the passage they had just read: 53 percent of those who had just read the parable of the Good Samaritan but only 29 percent of those who had just read the passage on vocational alternatives to ministry helped. However, according to Darley and Batson, "only the hurry main effect was significantly . . . related to helping behavior" and "only hurry was a significant predictor of whether one will help or not."²¹

According to the situationist interpretation of these results, the subjects' religious goals, which were a matter of their character, did not determine their behavior; rather, the degree to which they had been prompted to hurry, a feature of the situation, did. Ross and Nisbett elaborate: the late seminarians were reluctant to stop because they were already late for a task they felt obliged to perform, and for that reason were also harried about their upcoming talk, whereas the early seminarians were ready to stop because they had the time to, and their having the time to may have led them to walk more slowly, notice more of their environment, and perhaps look for an excuse to slow down.²² Doris wonders that such a slight situational factor as being late could lead to such callous behavior.²³

19. Although of the sixteen who helped, those who viewed religion as a quest offered more incomplete and tentative help than did helpers with other religious goals (so the character variable may have influenced how the helpers helped). From responses to a follow-up questionnaire on the relationship between personal and social ethics and the subjects' own most recent experience, it emerged that the seminarians in a hurry had either not seen their situation as calling for ethical decision or had felt a conflict between their duties to the victim and to the experimenters.

20. Darley and Batson report only the percentages; I owe the actual numbers to Charles Young's "Comments on Miller" (comments on Christian Miller, "Social Psychology and Virtue Ethics," presented at the American Philosophical Association meeting, Seattle, March 28, 2002).

21. Darley and Batson, pp. 105–61.

22. Ross and Nisbett, pp. 48–49.

23. Doris, *Lack of Character*, p. 34.

*Helping for a dime.*²⁴—Subjects were callers from public pay phones in malls in San Francisco and Philadelphia. Some subjects found a dime in the pay phone (planted there in advance by the experimenters), others did not. As each subject left the phone booth, a confederate of the experimenter dropped a folder full of papers in his or her path. Of the eight men and eight women who had found the free dimes, six men and eight women helped the confederate to pick up her papers; of the nine men and sixteen women who had not found a free dime, eight men and sixteen women did not help the confederate to pick up her papers. Social psychologists Isen and Levin suggest that finding the dime led subjects to feel in a good mood, and feeling good leads to helping.²⁵

Doris finds that this experiment falsifies the supposition that there is such a thing as behavioral reliability or cross-situational consistency that might need to be explained by character traits;²⁶ furthermore, the experiment shows “not [just] that mood influences behavior . . . but just how unobtrusive the stimuli that induce the determinative moods can be.”²⁷

*Cheating, stealing, lying.*²⁸—Over 8,000 schoolchildren aged eight to sixteen were placed in moderately tempting situations where they had opportunities (1) to cheat on tests (by copying from a key, adding more answers after time was called, peeping, and faking a solution to a puzzle), (2) to cheat, on homework, or by faking a record in athletic contests, or by faking, peeping, or stealing in party games, (3) to steal money from a box used in a test, (4) to lie, about their conduct in general or about cheating on tests in 1 above. The correlation between behaviors listed within any one of the groups 1–4 was quite high—for example, between behaviors in 1 it was .721, but the correlation across behavior types 1, 2, 3, and 4 was only .227.²⁹

Situationists point out that we call a person who cheats on exams ‘a cheat’ or ‘dishonest’, expecting (they claim) that she will also pocket any money she finds and lie. The honesty studies falsify this expectation; instead, they find that people do behave consistently across situations that are very alike: the correlation between cheating on an exam and cheating on another exam is quite high; higher still is the correlation between cheating in a particular way on one cheating occasion (e.g.,

24. Alice M. Isen and Paula F. Levin, “Effect of Feeling Good on Helping: Cookies and Kindness,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 21 (1972): 384–88.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 387.

26. See, e.g., Doris, “Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics,” p. 504.

27. Doris, *Lack of Character*, p. 30.

28. Hugh Hartshorne and M. A. May, *Studies in the Nature of Character*, vol. 1, *The Nature of Deceit* (New York: Macmillan, 1928).

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 122–25.

sneaking a look at the answer key) and doing so again. This kind of consistency at most licenses us to attribute to people “narrow” dispositions or traits such as “cheat on exams” or “answer-key-peep,” but our ordinary character attributions are not so situation-specific: upon discovering that someone has cheated on an exam, we are likely to say that he is a cheat, or dishonest.³⁰

III. WHAT’S IN AND OUT OF CHARACTER ON THE SITUATIONIST CONCEPTION

Walter Mischel’s classic *Personality and Assessment* surveys the various senses in which psychologists speak of a “character trait”: as a “summary label for observed stable individual differences in behavior”; as “a construct or abstraction to account for enduring behavioral consistencies and differences”; finally, as a real existence in a person which deter-

30. Although they are not crucial to the argument of this article, I want to register four concerns about the methodology of these experiments. Of the experiments reported above, two—the studies of obedience to authority and honesty—were carried out on a large number of subjects, but the other two—on helping behavior—were only carried out on about forty subjects, groups small enough to raise a question about how significant information could be distinguished from noise. Second, these experiments (and all the others I have read in this tradition) do not track the behavior of individuals across situations. Most of them observe any given individual only on one occasion. But what can be reasonably concluded about the consistency of people’s behavior on the basis of a single observation? (On this question, see the useful discussion in Seymour Epstein, “Aggregation and Beyond: Some Basic Issues on the Prediction of Behavior,” *Journal of Personality* 51 [1983]: 360–92. Epstein points out that psychologists assume that their one-time results are reliable, instead of trying to replicate the experiments to see whether the causally efficacious factors are the ones identified by them, rather than being, say, situational factors overlooked by them. However, aggregation cannot prove cross-situational consistency, as Epstein hopes, since aggregating across situations begs the question of the relative contributions of situation and character variables to behavior. Compare Walter Mischel and P. K. Peake, “Beyond Déjà Vu in the Search for Cross-situational Consistency” [*Psychological Review* 89 (1982): 730–55, esp. pp. 737–38].) Third, those experiments that do several tests on the same subjects (such as the honesty study) nevertheless do not track their behavior as individuals but instead infer the behavior of individuals from the behavior of groups. But not all the individuals in a group behave like the group average, so, as Sreenivasan points out, the consistency data, being averages, are consistent with there being a few highly consistent individuals in the group (p. 56). Surely the observation that cross-situational consistency and stable character are not the norm cannot be thought a challenge to virtue ethics. (Doris acknowledges this point but seems untroubled by it on the grounds that “the situationist has a powerful indirect argument against the existence of *widespread* consistency in helping behavior” [*Lack of Character*, p. 38, my emphasis]. But the absence of widespread consistency in helping behavior is just what virtue ethics would predict.) A final methodological concern is about what we should infer about adults from observations of children’s cross-situational inconsistency or narrowness of disposition—might children not be more impressionable, less committed to particular ideals of conduct, or less integrated than adults?

mines, and can be inferred from, distinctive and consistent behavior.³¹ And the claim of situationist psychologists is that empirical investigation does not turn up significant stable differences in people's behavior.

Although Harman and Doris take this conception of a character trait to be the same as Aristotle's,³² it is not. Aristotle, and in general virtue ethicists, could easily concede that character traits of the sort investigated by situationists do not explain behavior, or do not exist, without giving up on the attainable goal of a virtuous character. To show this, I discuss in this section several assumptions made by situationists about character and character traits that distinguish their conception of character from the virtue ethics conception.

A. *Character Traits Are Distinctive*

In saying that behavior covaries more with situation than with character, situationists are not denying that the individual agent (as opposed to her external environment) determines her behavior, nor are they minimizing the individual agent's contribution to her behavior. On the situationist definition of character, individuals may contribute a great deal to their actions without it following that their character traits contribute to these actions; this is because character traits are by definition supposed to be distinctive. As Harman puts it, "To deny that people differ significantly in character traits is not to deny that they have any dispositions at all. People might well all share certain dispositions, such as a disposition to make the fundamental attribution error."³³ So the claim that situation rather than character is explanatorily powerful is

31. Walter Mischel, *Personality and Assessment* (New York: Wiley, 1968), pp. 5–6.

32. Harman writes, "Aristotle (1985) describes the ordinary conception of such character traits. They are relatively long-term stable dispositions to act in distinctive ways." See "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology," p. 166; cf. Doris, *Lack of Character*, pp. 15–18.

33. Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology," p. 175. Ross and Nisbett do not always distinguish the question of whether behavior is best explained by the contribution of the person or the situation from the question of whether it is best explained by the contribution of character or situation. For example, in reflecting on Solomon Asch's finding that even when asked to make simple perceptual judgments, experimental subjects would not contradict an obviously erroneous judgment if it was unanimous, they say, "the ease of demonstrating massive conformity should not prompt us to conclude . . . that people are sheep, that they are somehow dispositionally inclined to join the majority chorus rather than allow their discordant note to stand out. Although more or less the conventional view of Asch's contemporaries, such a conclusion would reflect the fundamental attribution error we decry throughout this book" (p. 33). But to say that all people are sheep is to make no claim about distinctive character traits. Ross and Nisbett's concern here is different: they want to make the Asch phenomenon intelligible, and they don't think that saying "people have the disposition to conform" does this. Instead, they try to make the Asch phenomenon intelligible by pointing out that it is with good reason that people do not want to contradict group judgments, since other people are generally important sources of information for us.

not the claim that individuals contribute little or nothing to their behavior; rather, it is the claim that behavior covaries with situational variables rather than (putative) character variables: variations in situation (i.e., what the situation is, or is taken to be) result in much greater behavioral variation than do variations in subjects (i.e., who is responding to the situation). What each individual contributes to behavior, even if it is a great deal, is pretty much what any other individual would contribute.

It is worth asking how important distinctiveness, or variance, is to the conception of character in virtue ethics. If a character trait is by definition something that distinguishes an individual and her behavior from others and their behavior, then a successful social program of character building, such as those envisioned in the political writings of Plato and Aristotle, would eliminate character traits. But that seems very odd. It seems reasonable to suppose instead that how distinctive people's character traits are is an empirical matter, depending on how much their education and the requirements of their society make them alike (e.g., with respect to obedience or promptness).³⁴ Thus, Harman cannot dismiss without argument the possibility that everyone could have the character defect of excessive obedience to authority (see Sec. II above).³⁵ Depending on specific social factors, some of our stable dispositions may be distinctive while others are not. Traditional virtue ethicists did not, and we ought not, subscribe to the view that one person's possession of a character trait depends on most other people's nonpossession of that trait. It would be better to say that character traits can be, or must be capable of being, distinctive.

B. Character Traits Are Broad-Based

Situationists take the honesty study described in Section II to show that people's behavior is inconsistent and their distinctive dispositions are unstable when these behaviors and dispositions are conceived of as broad-based, that is, as dispositions to behave in distinctive ways across a range of situations.³⁶ Memorably, the same study seems to show that narrow dispositions are quite stable, since behavior in situations that are very like one another is quite consistent.

When we reflect on the honesty study, its results do not seem so counterintuitive after all. For although we use a single word, 'honest',

34. Milgram, in *Obedience to Authority*, argues that the trait of obedience to authority is very widespread and provides probable evolutionary and cultural explanations for its being so.

35. I am grateful to Lisa Tessman for discussion on this subject.

36. Ross and Nisbett thus distinguish stability, which they stipulate to be displaying the same behavior in the same (type of) situation, from cross-situational consistency (p. 101).

to describe the behaviors of not lying, not cheating, and not stealing, it does not seem obvious that not lying, not cheating, and not stealing are the same sort of thing, or even that they are deeply connected. It may be that underlying this single word are three distinct and unrelated dispositions, the first a disposition not to lie, supported by the thought that respecting others requires one to tell them the truth; the second a disposition not to cheat, on the grounds that in cheating one exploits a system that one should uphold; the third a disposition not to steal, for the reason that people should be able to enjoy secure possession of their property. Studies like the honesty study may show us that we need to abandon some folk-psychological character traits, because they assume cross-situational consistency where there is no reason to expect any, and to replace them in our thinking with dispositions like honesty with respect to property.

One might object that such a narrowing of character attributions is ad hoc. Harman says, “narrow dispositions do not count.”³⁷ One reason he gives is that such narrowly specified dispositions are difficult to distinguish from strategies developed in a specific situation and then repeated.³⁸ But if narrow consistency is due to people trying to re-use the strategies they have developed in previous very similar situations, people might build broader, cross-situationally consistent, dispositions by extending these strategies to less similar cases. So, for example, one might take to lying on the grounds that cheating on tests has “worked” to one’s advantage in the past, because one has reflected that the key to successful cheating is deception and that other forms of deception, such as lying, might work to one’s advantage as well. Or one might stop cheating upon reflection that it involves a kind of deception of other people importantly like the deception one objects to in lying. If this is right, then there may in fact be some sort of unity to honesty, but discovering this unity, and developing a disposition to honesty in general, may take a fair amount of work. It may require a strong interest (in the consequences of deceiving or not, or in the activity of deceiving or not) to lead one to extend one’s strategies (of deception or non-deception) across situations, and it may also be that transferring strategies from one situation to another that is quite different poses significant cognitive challenges. Both the absence of a strong enough interest

37. Harman, “Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology,” p. 167. One might also object that narrow dispositions are not explanatory in the way that broad dispositions purport to be: it is one thing if I answer your question as to why someone copied from an answer key by saying “he’s dishonest” but quite another if I say “he’s an answer-key copier.” But I don’t see how “he’s dishonest” is explanatory either, and such so-called explanations are absent from traditional virtue ethics.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

and the cognitive obstacles to transferring strategies may help to explain cross-situational inconsistency.

C. *Subjective Construal*

The situationist claim that situation explains and predicts behavior better than character need not be seen as a behaviorist position. For example, Ross and Nisbett say that it is not the situation as it is objectively that allows us to predict and explain their behavior but, rather, the actor's construal of the situation—how he or she interprets the situation. Laypeople, they complain, operating with the tools of folk psychology, “consistently fail to make sufficient allowance for the role that construal plays in determining behavior”: we don't recognize the degree to which anyone's understanding of any situation is the result of a constructive process; we don't appreciate the variability of subjective construals among persons; finally, when we are surprised by someone's behavior, we tend to conclude that she is different from other ordinary people, rather than that she and we may be construing her situation differently.³⁹

Taking subjective construal into account requires us to note that subjects in the same situation, objectively speaking, are not in the same situation on the situationist understanding, because their subjective construals of the situation may vary. For two situations may seem relevantly similar to an experimenter but not so to the subjects of the experiment (in which case supposed inconsistencies in behavior may not be [subjectively] inconsistent at all).⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

39. Ross and Nisbett, pp. 12–13.

40. These points are noted in Walter Mischel, “Toward a Cognitive Social Learning Reconceptualization of Personality,” *Psychological Review* 80 (1973): 268, and “Personality Dispositions Revisited and Revised,” in *Handbook of Personality*, ed L. A. Pervin (New York: Guilford, 1990), pp. 118, 119–20.

41. This point is also made by Sreenivasan. “Suppose . . . that Homer believes in ‘finders keepers’ and so does not consider pocketing some stray change to count as *stealing*. Then he will regard pocketing the change as perfectly consistent with his conventionally honest behavior in, say, the cheating situation. For their part, however, Hartshorne and May count *not* taking the change as the ‘honest’ response in this situation. Since the behavioral measures in their study are ‘objective,’ as we have already noted, it is their specifications of honesty which are used to score the subjects. . . . It follows . . . that failure to predict a person's behavior on the basis of ‘objective’ behavioral measures—that is, low consistency coefficients between such measures—is not always good evidence that the person's behavior is actually inconsistent across the situation in question” (p. 58). Sreenivasan's methodological point is right, but to their credit, Hartshorne and May explicitly consider the issue whether their tests measure what they claim to measure, and one of their methods for ascertaining this was to ask the children how they understood what they had done. So, e.g., they asked the students who had had an opportunity to cheat “whether or not they used the answer sheets wrongly or got help at home and

A natural response to this proposal that behavior correlates most with situation as subjectively construed is to ask, why is how we construe our situations not part of our character?⁴² After all, the inclusion of subjective construal in situation blurs the intuitive sharpness of the distinction between situation and character. One might wonder: if subjective construal is taken to be part of our situation rather than an effect of our character, hasn't the notion of character been so emptied that there is nothing left in character for behavior to correlate to? And how exactly are we to understand situation, when one's situation includes how one sees one's situation?

Seeing why situationists might not want to take subjective construal as an effect of character can help to clarify the situationist thesis. For while we might think that character includes patterns of perception and reasoning, values, goals, and beliefs, situationists might want to distinguish these from character, on the grounds that a character trait must be distinctive: given any (common) character trait, some people will have it and others won't; and the presence or absence of the character trait should correlate with their differing behaviors. But since experimental subjects converge on a behavioral norm across a range of situations, their subjective construals of those situations must not be distinctive either. Further, a character trait is supposed to be a stable, long-term disposition. But since experimental subjects also behave inconsistently across a range of situations, their subjective construals do not constitute a stable pattern. So to the extent that the distinctiveness and stability required of a character trait do not obtain in an individual's subjective construals of different situations, subjective construal would not be part of character.

Unfortunately, situationists are not at all clear whether subjective

whether they regarded this as cheating." Of the 2,141 answers they document, 91 percent answered the question, and 88 percent of these said that copying from answer keys was cheating. They are sure that 44 percent of the 2,141 did copy from answer keys, and of these, 89 percent answered the question and 82 percent of them said that copying from answer keys was cheating (p. 139).

42. A point of clarification: psychologists sometimes understand subjective construal to include whatever in the subject cues their response: not only their conscious, recoverable, interpretation of the situation but also consciously irretrievable reflexes that lead them to act. For example, a subject's construal of her situation might include whatever prompts her to reach for an object flashed before only one eye that is accessible only to one hemisphere of her brain, when the lack of information to the other hemisphere of the brain prevents her from being able to say why she is doing what she is doing. My remarks on subjective construal are limited to the subject's conscious and recoverable interpretation of the situation, both because this is what the influential situationist psychologists (and Doris and Harman) focus on and because I think the value of philosophizing about character is probably limited to this and does not extend to unconscious reflexes.

construals are or are not distinctive and consistent across situations.⁴³ Part of the problem is that it is not clear what is included in subjective construal—does it include beliefs, desires, values, goals, or what? Harman says, “People have different innate temperaments, different knowledge, different goals, different abilities, and tend to be in or think they are in different situations. All such differences can affect what people will do.”⁴⁴ But if people’s differing goals lead them to behave differently, one might think, isn’t this very close to admitting that differences in character result in differing behavior? Traditional virtue ethicists identify people’s characters and explain their behaviors in terms of their distinctive ultimate goals. For example, Plato explains that the oligarchic character steals from orphans because of his single-minded pursuit of wealth (rather than because of some orphan-robbing disposition, or even some general robbing disposition). And because the timocratic character’s overarching goal is to win honor, he is like the oligarch in that he hoards his wealth, but unlike him in that he does so in secret.⁴⁵

The situationist’s difference with the virtue ethicist here may lie in the kinds of goals the situationist will admit to influence behavior. The experiment on the Princeton Theological Seminary students actually recorded something about the students’ religious goals (the character variable was whether they saw religion as a quest, means, or end) and found no correlation between these goals and the students’ stopping to help a person in distress; what determined their stopping to help or not was how much time they thought they had. Presumably a situationist would say that the seminarians’ immediate goal of giving the requested lecture influenced their actions, but their religious goals—their ultimate goals, or the goals they would have taken to define who they were—did not. This would be an interesting result, but the experiment does not establish it. Surely Christianity enjoins the Christian to do good works

43. For example, Ross and Nisbett illustrate one kind of subjective construal, the ‘framing effect’, which is the effect on one’s judgment of the comparison class one uses in making the judgment by saying, “For example, the vegetable soup you taste now is compared with the vegetable soup you had last week, the minestrone you had last month, the canned vegetable soup you had as a child, and so on” (p. 63). Depending on what the comparison class against which every stimulus is judged includes (memories from the distant past?), construals may turn out to be quite stable and distinctive.

44. Harman, “Virtue Ethics without Character Traits,” Gilbert Harman Web site, <http://www.princeton.edu/~harman/Papers/Thomson.html>. Harman also says that character traits are “habits of perception, motivation and action: habits of perceiving situations in certain ways, habits of being motivated to act in certain ways.” Kupperman says that since Harman allows that individual differences in people’s goals and interpretations of their situations can lead to variations in their behavior, “Harman . . . has given back what he first took away in his initial statement about ‘seemingly ideal moral character’ not really being displayed in behavior” (p. 245).

45. See Plato, *Republic* 554a–55a for the oligarch, 548ab for the timocrat.

whether he values Christianity as an end, as a means to salvation, or as the meaning of his life? Perhaps, however, the point of the experiment is to show that all the seminarians, even though they take being Christian to define who they are (whatever their exact attitude toward Christianity), are just like ordinary people in that their performance or non-performance of good works is influenced primarily by how much time they have. But no nonseminarians were subjected to the experiment, and it is worth asking, do 50 percent of nonseminarians stop to help someone in trouble when they're not in a hurry?

D. Further Features of the Situationist Conception of Character

As we have seen, situationists understand a character trait to be a stable, long-term disposition to behave in distinctive ways across a range of situations. But if we reflect on the experiments that purport to test the effects of character traits on behavior, more of their assumptions about what character traits are like come to light. For example, the Milgram obedience study supposedly reveals that people do not have robust dispositions to avoid inflicting pain on unwilling and innocent persons. But what if people have more than one character trait; what if they have, in addition to an aversion to cruelty, a disposition to obedience or to cooperativeness? In this case, whether subjects continued to shock the learner or walked out of the experiment, they would have been displaying behavior inconsistent with one of these character traits. Again, the seminarians in the Darley and Batson experiment were faced with competing demands for help, from the experimenters and from the person in the doorway: it was in the course of helping the experimenters that they were called upon to help the person in the doorway. Whomever they helped, they would also have been failing to help someone and so displaying inconsistently helpful behavior.

A person in a situation has to choose one course of action, sometimes among bad alternatives. But although one can ultimately act in only one way in a situation, one can feel a number of different, even conflicting, ways about that action: one might think little of it, or feel torn, or wholeheartedly endorse it. There would seem to be a wealth of information about subjects' feelings about their actions that goes unmentioned in situationist conclusions—this even though a number of studies record subjects' postexperiment reflections on what they did. Milgram documents the stress experienced by many of his experimental subjects, suggesting that defiant subjects experienced less stress even before the moment of defiance than did compliant subjects.⁴⁶ Attention

46. Milgram, in *Obedience to Authority*, also reports that after the experiment, some subjects were haunted by what they had done while others people continued to blame the learner.

to behavior alone can mask information that might further the understanding of why people act as they do.

In their exclusive attention to behavior, the psychological studies implicitly conceive of a character trait as something that will, if present, manifest itself in characteristic behavior, and will do so no matter what else there is in the situation for the person to respond to—in other words, the character trait will determine behavior in isolation from other character traits, thoughts, concerns, and so forth a person might have in a given situation. Whatever the origins of the character traits being tested for (our ordinary discourse and practices, personality and social psychology or even virtue ethics),⁴⁷ the experiments treat all the traits on the model of aggression: people who possess a given trait are expected, to the extent that they possess the trait, to behave spontaneously and unreflectively in ways that manifest it on every occasion.

This is an unreasonable expectation, and its unreasonableness points out that the Darley and Batson study teaches us very little about the helpfulness or lack thereof of the Princeton seminarians, or about the existence or nonexistence of helpfulness. For consider: one could not be a very helpful person if one always allowed one's helping activity to be interrupted by new calls for help. Further, imagine someone who is always a good Samaritan, where this means helping in every situation where help is needed, and as much as is needed. This sort of consistent helping behavior would seem to require the support of an infrastructure that the middle-class subjects of the psychological experiments do not have, such as might be provided by, for example, a monastic community. Adults who have adapted to life in modern societies have learned to

47. Some situationists claim that the source of this conception of character is our ordinary practices of character trait attribution, but even if this is so, I suspect that personality psychology is a much more immediate (and formative) source for the situationist conception of character. Certainly some of the character traits tested for by the social psychologists derive from the discipline rather than from ordinary trait attribution, e.g., extroversion and aggression. Other character traits, like friendliness, conscientiousness, altruism, may seem to have their origins in ordinary discourse and practice, but that we use some of the same character terms as the psychologists should not obscure the differences between what we and they have in mind. Personality psychologists have come to a consensus that the main personality factors determining behavior (in different combinations) are extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and culture. These "five factors" supposedly are abstracted from and adumbrate the 4,500 terms in *Webster's Dictionary* that can be used to distinguish the behavior of one person from that of another in terms of stable traits: e.g., at the low end of the agreeableness factor fall the traits vindictiveness, ill-humor, criticism, disdain, aggressiveness, antagonism, dogmatism, temper, distrust, greed, callousness, and uncooperation; under dogmatism fall about fifty traits, including being biased, opinionated, stubborn, inflexible. See Oliver P. John, "The 'Big Five' Factor Taxonomy: Dimensions of Personality in the Natural Language and in Questionnaires," in Pervin, ed., pp. 67–75. Compare Mischel, *Personality and Assessment*, pp. 43 ff.

filter out or somehow disregard the needs of others when responding to them would be too costly: the exceptionlessly good Samaritan not only will not make it to her talks on time; she had better give up any thoughts of a life plan other than helping when needed. Perhaps the experiments bring out a conflict between our sense of what is the moral thing to do and our knowledge that most of the time we don't do the moral thing. Many people to whom it is important to be helpful to those in need formulate policies—for example, to give generously to established relief organizations but to ignore panhandlers, or to give to the first person who asks one for money each day but none thereafter, or to devote Saturday afternoons, but only them, to charity work. It is true that some people at some times might adhere to such policies too rigidly, but it looks as though even quite moderate adherents to such policies would be counted inconsistently helpful by the criteria of the experiments and would be adduced as evidence to support the assertion that the trait of helpfulness does not exist.⁴⁸

Even our lay understanding of character doesn't ordinarily lead us to expect that someone whom we may legitimately call helpful will display actions of the helpful type (whatever that type of action is) on every occasion, and so we wouldn't conclude from one failure to help that a person lacks the character trait of helpfulness.⁴⁹ We should not (and I think do not) expect even a very helpful person to stop to help a person in distress if she thinks that doing so will interfere with her doing something else she considers to be very important; 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. And, as Ross and Nisbett acknowledge, predictions of relative likelihood (especially of extreme behaviors) are facilitated by observations of past (especially extreme) behaviors—in other words, although knowing how

48. David Velleman suggests that by analogy, if you watched some hungry people go past restaurants they don't like you could conclude there's no such thing as hunger.

49. Unless we have very little exposure to the person—so, e.g., we might have hastily concluded that she is helpful after a few observations (say in an experimental setting), and then, because we regard that judgment as provisional, we may retract it upon seeing her fail to behave helpfully where it seems to us that she should have. So we might agree with the situationists that we shouldn't jump to conclusions about people's characters on the basis of very little experience, particularly if that experience does not include seeing them in varied situations. And while we do use the same character terms for people upon first impression and after we have seen them in a range of situations (at work and then in the car pool and then at a weekend party), in the latter case, we may be using them as shorthand. So, e.g., Jane's students may not know about her temper, but her husband may know both about her temper and her patience with students. When he says, "Jane has a bad temper," it's not because he hasn't seen her with her students; if reminded of her patience with students, he could explain, "You'd never know it if you only saw her at work, because she's also very conscientious about the demands of her job."

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.⁵⁰

The expectation that a character trait can operate in isolation—suggested by the psychologists' testing for character variables in isolation—seems to be quite implausible. And putting the traits that dispose us to act into their proper deliberative context explains why: when we deliberate about what to do, we consider many things, and in the experiments, the considerations captured under the rubric of the character trait being tested for may not seem to subjects to be the most important. This suggests that rather than isolating character variables and testing for their manifestations in behavior, social psychologists need to engage in more painstaking research that takes into account how the considerations experimental subjects have in mind might involve various character traits and how these might interact.⁵¹

It is worth mentioning that unlike Harman and Doris, who take it that the psychologists' empirical findings give us reason to dispense with character, Ross and Nisbett take it that what we need is a better conception of character. They advocate an "idiographic" approach, according to which we should not expect that every individual has some degree of every character trait (as is assumed by most studies on character traits).⁵² Rather, we should only expect individuals to behave consistently with traits which they deem important to have, or in areas in which consistent behavior matters to them (one reason someone might cheat on tests but not steal money might be that she doesn't have much respect

50. Ross and Nisbett, pp. 111, 116–17. And they suggest that we may engage in overconfident prediction about what someone will do in a particular situation because we haven't distinguished the predictive success of such relative judgments from the predictive failure of absolute judgments. Compare Epstein, p. 366.

51. Sreenivasan suggests three "generic requirements" for the behavioral measures of a character trait: each behavioral measure must specify a response that represents a central or paradigm case of what that trait requires; the concrete situation each specifies must not have any features that defeat the reason on account of which that trait requires the response in question; and the subject and the observer must agree on these characterizations of the specified responses and situations (pp. 61–63).

52. Mischel and Peake ("Beyond Déjà Vu in the Search for Cross-situational Consistency") describe a study of conscientiousness on sixty-three Carleton College students, using nineteen behavioral measures supplied by the students and recording the students' own assessment of their conscientiousness. They found that the students who described themselves as consistently conscientious were more consistently conscientious on what they saw as prototypic behaviors for conscientiousness than were students who described themselves as variably conscientious. Across situations (prototypic and nonprototypic), however, there was no difference between the consistency of those who described themselves as consistently conscientious and those who described themselves as variably conscientious.

for tests but does care that people or institutions be secure in the possession of their property; we should expect this person not to steal, but we should not expect her to avoid cheating on tests). Further, in determining which behaviors are relevant to consistency with a trait, we should be guided by the individuals themselves (a person might cheat on tests even if she cares to be honest across the board because she doesn't think how she behaves on tests has anything to do with being honest—she might think tests reward the educationally privileged, reinforce pernicious assumptions about innate differences in ability, etc.). Once we have identified the particular traits and behaviors relevant to particular individuals, we may test for consistency correlations between traits and behaviors and among behaviors across situations.⁵³ Far from denying the existence of character or individual differences, Ross and Nisbett's conclusion is that "the key to a more powerful conception of individual differences is to be found in the enduring motivational concerns and cognitive schemes that guide attention, interpretations, and the formulation of goals and plans."⁵⁴

IV. VIRTUE ETHICS

It should by now be clear that the experiments which find character traits to correlate poorly with behavior rely on a very particular conception of a character trait: as an isolable and nonrational disposition to manifest a given stereotypical behavior that differs from the behavior of others and is fairly situation insensitive. Social psychologists who are dissatisfied with this conception of character and on the lookout for a better alternative will find one in traditional virtue ethics. According to traditional virtue ethicists, virtues are not dispositions to perform stereotypical actions popularly associated with a given trait but, rather, dispositions to respond appropriately—in judgment, feeling, and action—to one's situation. Such responses require the active involvement of the agent's powers of reasoning. Below, I give a schematic account of the traditional virtue ethics conception of character in which the differences between Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics do not much matter. However, as far as possible I draw on Aristotle, since contemporary moral philosophers both sympathetic to and critical of virtue ethics refer most often to his version of virtue ethics.

Before I turn to virtue ethics, however, a caveat: situationists see

53. Daryl Bem and A. Allen, "On Predicting Some of the People Some of the Time: The Search for Cross-situational Consistencies in Behavior," *Psychological Review* 81 (1974): 506–20; cf. Ross and Nisbett, pp. 102–3.

54. Ross and Nisbett, p. 20; cf. pp. 162–68, where they say that this superior conception of character will attend to people's distinctive goals, competencies for achieving their goals, and subjective representations of their situations.

the notion of character and character traits as an explanatory construct in folk science and criticize it as bad science. Ross and Nisbett, the psychologists who identified the fundamental attribution error in our ordinary explanations of behavior in terms of character, are best known for their work on the powers and limitations of our intuitive inferential strategies, and they consider laypeople to be what they call “intuitive scientists.”⁵⁵ Harman follows them in treating character as a superfluous explanatory entity and as bad science. But we use character attributions evaluatively as well as explanatorily, and this evaluative use of character terms figures prominently in traditional virtue ethics discussions of character. So Aristotle describes and tries to explain the rationale behind our character talk rather than taking all of it literally, as might be appropriate with a scientific theory: for example, in his discussion of the virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle observes that we call one and the same person “ambitious” and “unambitious,” depending on which term we’re using as a term of praise,⁵⁶ and that we consider meanness the vice opposed to liberality because meanness is a greater evil than prodigality and because most people are naturally prone to meanness rather than prodigality.⁵⁷ But Aristotle is not limited by our talk, introducing in his discussion of the specific virtues and vices several that have no name.

Of course, character talk, both in virtue ethics and ordinary practice, is thought to be explanatory as well as evaluative. The best way to understand most of our character talk seems to be, in Bernard Williams’s terms, as “thick ethical concepts”: notions that are at the same time descriptive, or world guided, and prescriptive, or action guiding.⁵⁸ But bearing in mind the evaluative aspect of character talk suggests explanations for some of what situationists can only see as our mistakes: perhaps the sort of overgeneralization for which situationists fault people when we describe, for example, the cheat on tests as a “cheat” rather than as a “cheat on tests” stems from the evaluative and action-guiding nature of our character terms. To call the person in question a “cheat on tests” just may not strike most people as powerful enough to express how wrong they think the action in question is and how strongly they feel that the person should refrain from cheating, even just on tests, in the future. Further, the label, ‘cheat’, captures what is wrong with the

55. Richard Nisbett and Lee Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980), pp. 3 ff.

56. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Christopher Rowe and Sarah Broadie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), EN 1107b30FF, cf. 1125b11FF.

57. *Ibid.*, 1122a14–16.

58. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 129–31, 141–42.

behavior (the fact that it is deceptive) and leaves out what is irrelevant (the fact that it's on a test).⁵⁹

A. A Disposition, with Respect to Actions and Feelings, Issuing in Decisions

Rather than provide a definition of character or of a character trait, Aristotle defines virtue. Virtue is “a disposition issuing in decisions, depending on the intermediacy of the kind relative to us, this being determined by rational prescription and in the way in which the wise person would determine it.”⁶⁰ A virtuous disposition is a disposition to act and feel in particular ways in response to rational considerations; it is expressed in our decisions, which are determined through rational deliberation.⁶¹ The object of a decision is some concrete action that will bring about some end that the agent has, or some good according to the agent's conception of the good. Because Aristotelian vices are also dispositions issuing in decisions, we should understand them, too, as dispositions of our rational and appetitive faculties. Aristotle does not treat virtues and vices as necessitating particular kinds of behavior but, rather, as tendencies that incline us to behave as we do. So, for example, the prodigal tends to give away more than he has and to borrow so that he can keep spending, but this is not a behavior beyond his control; indeed, in conditions of poverty he can turn himself around.⁶² Further, Aristotle does not treat such dispositions as by themselves explanatory of behavior: the explanation of the prodigal's behavior will ultimately refer to his beliefs about what the good life is and how to achieve it. (Situationists sometimes compare the folk psychology they are discrediting with what they call “folk physics”:⁶³ as the Aristotelian explanation for a heavy body's falling earthward is its earthward-falling disposition, so too, the Aristotelian explanation for the prodigal's spending a lot of money is his prodigal disposition. But Aristotle need not think that when he has named a disposition he is finished with the task of explaining the behavior with which it is associated.)

Aristotelian virtues may be quite narrow. For example, Aristotle suggests that magnificence, the virtue associated with appropriate expenditure of large sums of money, and magnanimity, the virtue associated with honorable actions on a grand scale, are distinct from generosity and due pride, the virtues associated with appropriate uses of

59. So if the empirical studies undermine folk psychology they do not undermine commonsense morality. Thanks to David Velleman for this last point.

60. Aristotle, 1106b36–1107a2.

61. *Ibid.*, 1104b3–13, 1105b20–1106a13, 1106b18, cf. 25, 35 ff., 1112a18–1113a14, 1151b34–1152a4.

62. *Ibid.*, 1119b30–1121b15.

63. Ross and Nisbett, p. 161, Harman “Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology,” p. 166.

wealth and honor on a normal scale.⁶⁴ The question, “broad or narrow?” is not significant for Aristotle because of the role of practical wisdom in virtue.

Aristotle insists that it is not possible to have virtue without practical wisdom, which is the disposition to deliberate well about what conduces to the good life in general.⁶⁵ He has many reasons for this view: the intermediate, at which virtue arrives, is in each case determined by right reason;⁶⁶ decision involves deliberation, and so an agent’s decision will be good only if her reasoning is true and her desire right.⁶⁷ But the deepest reason is that virtue, as a disposition to act and feel in response to reasons, is an excellence of a rational creature, something that puts its possessor and user in a good condition.⁶⁸ We are interested in virtue as something good for us, because we want what is good for us. And so we are interested in a condition that guides us well, not simply one that disposes us to perform certain sorts of actions. The condition that interests us will have to be intelligent, if it is to guide us in all the different situations life presents us. So it will have to include practical wisdom.

The centrality of practical wisdom to virtuous character leads Aristotle to distinguish between virtue, properly speaking, and what he calls ‘natural virtue’. Natural virtue is a disposition to be moved in a certain way, but without practical wisdom: even animals and children can have natural virtue, such as the passion that drives wild animals to face a danger when they are distressed or hungry. But animals and children do not face danger for the sake of the noble. Aristotle compares possessors of natural virtue to blind people with heavy or powerful bodies—when they move, they fall, heavily. Similarly, natural virtue without practical wisdom can be harmful for its possessor because it is not directed at the right objects. So, Aristotle says, he agrees with Socrates in believing that the virtues require knowledge.⁶⁹

On this picture, the virtues (properly speaking) cannot be dispositions merely to face danger, or to give aid to others, or to resist temptations, because what Aristotle and his audience are interested in are dispositions to do these things appropriately—with the right goal in mind, in relation to the right objects, in the right manner, and so on. So practical wisdom will be a condition that by its presence makes the virtues genuine virtues.⁷⁰ Aristotle individuates the virtues by enumerating the various domains in our lives which call for practical wisdom:

64. Aristotle, IV.1–4.

65. *Ibid.*, 1140a25ff, 1144b2–1145a5.

66. *Ibid.*, 1138b20; 1103b32; 1144b20–30.

67. *Ibid.*, 1139a21 ff.

68. *Ibid.*, 1106a15–25.

69. *Ibid.*, 1144b5–22, cf. 1116b24–1117a1.

70. *Ibid.*, 1145a1–2.

in relation to dangers (courage), in relation to temptations (moderation), in relation to wealth, generosity (or on a larger scale, magnificence), in relation to honor, due pride (or magnanimity), and so on. But although the virtues of friendliness, truthfulness, wittiness, justice, are all virtues in the domain of our relations to other people, their individuation is more fine grained, according to different types of relationships and social situations. Aristotle's practice here suggests flexibility in the individuation of the particular virtues—a flexibility allowed him because he conceives of virtue as one condition guided by practical wisdom. It seems open, then, to an Aristotelian to admit as new domains for practical attention those features of situations that social psychology identifies as particularly consequential for action: in the domain of group effects, there might be a virtue of taking appropriate account of the judgments of others; in the domain of time, a virtue of appropriate punctuality, and so on.

An examination of Aristotle's account of the early stages of virtue acquisition suggests how this global condition, practical wisdom, might enter into a person's character. According to Aristotle, we begin to acquire the virtues of character by a process of habituation.⁷¹ Under the guidance of someone else, we repeatedly perform certain actions and thereby come to have the corresponding virtue or vice: we become just by doing just actions, unjust by doing unjust actions, and so on.⁷² But this should not be understood as a process of conditioning in which a malleable soul is impressed by models of just any act-type, leading her to perform acts of that type: one consequence of Aristotle's assumption that we desire our own good is that not just any repeated action will stamp itself on the soul; rather, if it is to engage our motivation, the action must be seen by us as good for us. Correct Aristotelian habituation, then, involves the discovery of (some of) the intrinsic value of virtuous actions in doing them. As Myles Burnyeat puts it, Aristotle's point is that "practice has cognitive powers, in that it is the way we learn what is noble or just."⁷³ This is why Aristotle sometimes says that the starting points for knowledge lie in habituation: to learn to do what is virtuous is among other things to come to take the appropriate pleasure in doing it; one could only take pleasure in, for example, facing danger or abstaining from overindulgence if one saw these actions as noble and virtuous, and this is what practice enables one to do.⁷⁴ It is in a soul that has come to see the pleasantness of virtuous actions that practical

71. *Ibid.*, 1103a17.

72. *Ibid.*, 1103b20–25, 1105a16–1106a13.

73. Myles Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to Be Good," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 73.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

wisdom takes hold, illuminating the reasons why these actions are noble and virtuous, and enhancing the agent's capacity to discern what is the virtuous action in novel situations and hard cases.

The social psychological observation that our stable traits tend to be narrow can fit in with this account of how virtue is acquired by practice and then completed with practical wisdom. By performing actions of a certain type, I can see some of what is of value in so acting, in that situation. Perhaps I develop narrow dispositions easily. But what I need is the ability to respond correctly in situations for which my narrow traits are inadequate: they may give me no guidance, or conflicting guidance, or just the wrong guidance. And for this, I need to reflect deeply on what makes the responses guided by my narrow traits appropriate for the situations in which I found them appropriate and how similarities and differences in new circumstances will bear on the appropriateness of acting similarly or differently. Presumably I need to engage in this kind of reflection in both real-life and imagined situations, and with a view to consistently responding well. (It is a further question whether there is anything for reflection to discover, and if so, whether what it discovers is only what cultures regard as appropriate.)

B. Consistency

Situationist reports of our cross-situational inconsistency purport to be paradoxical; moral philosophers suggest that among the orthodoxies swept away by situationism is virtue ethics. So it is striking that traditional virtue ethicists frequently complain that most of us are unstable and inconsistent. Plato, for example, says that nonvirtuous people are "never alike, not even to themselves. They are impulsive and unstable";⁷⁵ the person who lacks the virtue of justice is "not of one mind"⁷⁶ but "shifts back and forth."⁷⁷ Similarly, the Stoic Epictetus chides his audience, "you are frequently bewildered and disturbed by your external impressions, and overcome by their persuasive character; and at one moment you consider these things good, and then again you consider them, though the very same, evil, and later on as neither good nor evil; and, in a word, you are subject to pain, fear, envy, turmoil, and change."⁷⁸

Yet virtue ethicists do not deny that nonvirtuous people have characters, indeed, some of them engage in classifying vicious people into various character types. In *Republic* VIII–IX, Plato describes four defec-

75. Plato, *Lysis*, 214d. All Plato citations can be found in John M. Cooper and Douglas S. Hutchinson, eds., *The Complete Works of Plato* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

76. Plato, *Republic*, 352a.

77. Plato, *Gorgias*, 481e.

78. Epictetus, *The Discourses as Reported by Arrian, the Manual, and Fragments*, trans. W. A. Oldfather (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952–56), discourse 2.22.6, cf. 25.

tive characters, corresponding to four defective constitutions: the timocrat, oligarch, democrat, and tyrant.⁷⁹ In his book *Characters*, Aristotle's student Theophrastus sketches various vicious character types according to the formula, "The X is the sort of person who x1, x2, x3" where x1, x2, x3 are stereotypical actions that an X sort of person does.

How are we to square these two thoughts: that the majority of us, who lack virtue, are unstable and inconsistent and that we nevertheless fall into various character types? In some respects, Plato's answer (assumed, I believe, by Aristotle and the Stoics) is surprisingly close to the situationists'. Most people's characters are produced and sustained by a particular social situation: the timocratic, or honor-loving, character is produced and sustained by a timocratic society; the democratic character by a democratic society. What this means is that each character learns the values that guide his or her actions from a particular cultural environment, sometimes through the mechanism of familial and peer pressure.⁸⁰ Even so, any but the most carefully monitored culture (that of the ideal city) contains conflicting ideals, and so people brought up in these societies will not, in the ordinary course, have consistent guides to behavior (this is the point of the monitoring of stories about gods and heroes in Plato's *Republic*). Guaranteeing that the behavior of ordinary people (i.e., people who lack philosophical wisdom) consistently conforms to virtue requires manipulating their situations—not only the environment in which people are brought up but also the situations in which they are called upon to act as adults. But such consistency and conformity to virtue is fragile: Plato points out that those of us who are not firmly enough anchored in our opinions about virtue may lose these opinions as a result of dialectical arguments we cannot respond to.⁸¹ Plato generates in dialectic the sort of novel situation today's psychologists try to create in their experiments—and finds similar cross-situational inconsistencies in our judgments about what is fine, good, to be done, and so on.

According to Plato, then, in the absence of wisdom our characters just are dispositions to behave reliably in those situations for which our upbringing has prepared us. Due to our lack of ethical knowledge, most of our characters are limited in stability and consistency and therefore in their ability to guide us. One way in which Plato characterizes this is to say that in the absence of a science of measurement in ethics, we judge the same good to be better when it is close to us in time and location and worse when it is far away and are swayed by appearances

79. Plato, *Republic*, 544d–579d.

80. *Ibid.*, 549c–50b.

81. *Ibid.*, 535 ff.

and irrelevant effects of context and perspective.⁸² To overcome the inconsistency of our appearance-led judgments, we require ethical knowledge. Knowledge can stabilize our characters and make our judgments and actions consistent because we want to live well, virtue enables us to live well, and knowledge enables us to identify and do things that are conducive to virtue and living well. What this knowledge consists in varies among the different formulations of traditional virtue ethics: Plato characterizes it variously as a science by which to measure pleasure and pain, as knowledge of how to use assets like health and wealth correctly, as a grasp of standards approximated by things in the world, as an account of the reason why. For the Stoics, it is the knowledge that only virtue is good and only vice evil, and that of the “indifferent” remainder, such and such are to be pursued as according to nature, others avoided as contrary to it. For Aristotle, the knowledge is a discriminative ability to judge where the right response lies in each particular case.

I am not suggesting that traditional virtue ethicists were the first situationists except for their higher hopes for ethical knowledge. The inconsistency they diagnose (rather than observe) is specifically inconsistency in a person’s evaluations or judgments of what is good or bad, right or wrong, to be done or not to be done. And the consistency they recommend is consistency across one’s evaluations and across the whole of one’s life—rather than on a single trait-dimension. 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. If one has found that helping one’s close associates brings benefits (in terms of praise, returns in kind, and so on) whereas helping strangers brings high costs (in terms of overwhelming responsibilities, fear, uncertainty as to what to do next, being shunned by one’s close associates), it is surely understandable (although not admirable) for one to restrict one’s helping behavior to one’s close associates. Mischel illustrates the same point using the example of dependency. Children are inconsistent in their dependency behavior, and, Mischel says, this is perfectly intelligible: a child may be rewarded for cuddly behavior by his preschool teacher but punished for the same behavior by his peers, in which case he will, and should be, cuddly with his preschool teacher but not his peers. Absolute behavioral consistency would be maladaptive.⁸³

(It may be objected that the experiments find people inconsistent in situations where behavioral consistency would not be maladaptive, or particularly difficult: it is easy to see, and the virtuous person would

82. Plato, *Protagoras*, 356ce.

83. Mischel, “Toward a Cognitive Social Learning Reconceptualization of Personality,” pp. 258–59.

surely see, that one should defy the experimenter rather than continuing to shock an experimental subject or that one should assist someone who is in distress rather than make it on time to give a talk. I do not doubt that the virtuous person would see her way to the right course of action, but perhaps there was no virtuous person among the subjects of these experiments: if virtue requires practical wisdom, one would expect virtuous persons to be rare. Moreover, as the experiments show, it is obviously not easy to see what one should do in the experimental situations. That we can easily say what is the thing to do upon hearing or reading a description of the experimental situation may say as much about our insensitivity to situational factors when we view situations from the outside as about our oversensitivity to situational factors from the inside. One conclusion to draw from situationist research may be that we should not confuse our conviction that some behavior is correct with the virtuous person's reasoned judgment that that behavior is correct: these judgments might converge, but the reasoning behind them may be very different.)

The difference between the situationist concern with behavioral consistency and the virtue ethics concern with consistent success raises the question: relative to what standard of consistency ought people to be judged consistent or not? If one's purpose is to evaluate folk psychology, then it is reasonable to take ordinary people's expectations as the standard. But if one's purpose is to evaluate virtue ethics, then the standard will have to be different and to take account of the fact that we are thinking, goal-oriented creatures.⁸⁴ It is possible to ask people not only what they consider to be behavior relevant to or consistent with the trait under examination but also what they hope to accomplish by their action, what they think are the constraints under which they are acting, and what the relevant options. No doubt this will not be the whole story because there are things about what we do that are unavailable to us, but that is no reason for ignoring what is available.

C. *Traits and Virtues*

The role of practical wisdom in the Aristotelian conception of virtue suggests some important differences between many of the character traits social psychology tests for (e.g., honesty, rigidity, avoidance, con-

84. Doris argues that even if we achieve coherent explanations of how people's behavior is consistent relative to their own standards, the inconsistencies most of us exhibit relative to the shared moral standards expressed in traditional moral trait terms are still objects of moral concern (*Lack of Character*, p. 80). I suspect the moral concern here is misplaced. The moral problem is our failure to live up to our own ethical standards, and we fail because what we learned at our mother's knee is the decent thing to do (help people when they're in trouble; be kind to animals) turns out, in our world, to require taking on the whole of society.

ditionability, dependency, and aggression)⁸⁵ and the traditional virtues (wisdom or prudence, courage, moderation, justice, piety, and their derivatives). While one might think that how aggressive, helpful, friendly, or honest one is has little or nothing to do with how one reasons, traditional virtue ethics assumes that because we want to live well and because the virtues enable us to live well, the virtues must enable one to make the right judgments about what to value and do and so must involve reasoning. The relationship between being virtuous and living well is also why traditional virtue ethics claims that the virtues require one another, and why virtue ethics is willing to revise ordinary conceptions of what behavior flows from a given virtue. For virtue to enable one to live well, the intellectual component of a virtue must be both relatively unrestricted and situation sensitive; that would be what enables the virtuous person to get it right in a range of circumstances.

Doris argues that the empirical evidence shows that people are not (and therefore cannot be?) evaluatively integrated but are, rather, fragmented. To explain 'evaluative integration', Doris says, "In a given character or personality the occurrence of a trait with a particular evaluative valence is probabilistically related to the occurrence of other traits with similar evaluative valences."⁸⁶ He associates this conception of evaluative integration with the Aristotelian view of virtue, but the so-called traits with positive evaluative valences are not virtues—they are simply dispositions inferred from behavior and judged good or "prosocial." One of Doris's examples of evaluative fragmentation is Oskar Schindler, who saved over a thousand Jews from concentration camps but also was a war profiteer and womanizer.⁸⁷ If virtue ethicists believe that saving a thousand Jews from concentration camps is sufficient to make Schindler virtuous, or must express a virtuous disposition, his war-profiteering and womanizing activities are a problem. But traditional virtue ethicists, at least, are not in the business of inferring virtues from actions, or even patterns of actions, no matter how admirable. From his actions alone it cannot be determined whether Schindler acted out of courage, or, for example, guts and independence; if the latter, the traits are likely to be "prosocial," or to lead to "prosocial" and admirable actions, only in certain circumstances, and there is no reason to expect that a man of guts and independence is either likely or unlikely to be a war profiteer and a womanizer.

85. From Mischel's survey in *Personality and Assessment*, pp. 20–33. Traits lacking in generality were rigidity, honesty, avoidance, conditionability, dependency, aggression.

86. Doris, *Lack of Character*, p. 22.

87. *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 115.

V. STRATEGIES

In this final section, I'd like to return to the prospects for character building. For it may seem that however simplistic the conception of character embodied in social psychological research and however inconclusive its results for the more sophisticated conception of character employed in traditional virtue ethics, traditional virtue ethics (at least as I have described it) conceives of character as involving the kind of stability or consistency that only knowledge could provide, and knowledge of that sort is unattainable. And in this case, the virtue ethics conception of character is of little interest to contemporary moral philosophy.

In fact, however, traditional virtue ethics gives us plenty of less cognitively demanding strategies for character building. Later Stoic philosophers, in particular, are very concerned with how ordinary people can take charge of their situations. For example, Marcus Aurelius urges, "Wipe out your external impression. Stay the movement of the puppet-strings."⁸⁸ One strategy is the adoption of a personal role model as one's ideal. Epictetus suggests, "When you are about to meet somebody, in particular when it is one of those men who are held in very high esteem, propose to yourself the question, 'What would Socrates or Zeno have done under these circumstances?' and you will not be at a loss to make proper use of the occasion."⁸⁹ Critics who complain that this is useless advice because Socrates or Zeno wouldn't be in these circumstances or because if one could figure out what Socrates or Zeno would do, then one wouldn't need to think of their response at all, are missing the point. Socrates and Zeno also find themselves in difficult situations (in love with Alcibiades, shipwrecked), and thinking of Socrates or Zeno or whoever else can put one in mind of possibilities for action that wouldn't otherwise have occurred to one.

The Stoics recommend other rational strategies as well: one is to imagine yourself in situations that will test your commitment to your values—imagine losing your child, or finding out you are about to die—and think of how you want to respond.⁹⁰ This kind of vivid imagining would be hard work—it is not mere daydreaming about heroism but thinking in detail through all of the possible features of your situation

88. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. C. R. Haines (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1930), 7.29.

89. Epictetus, *Manual*, sec. 33.12–13.

90. Marcus Aurelius, 2.11, 2.5, 2.2, 7.69; cf. Epictetus, *Manual*, sec. 21; Seneca, *Letters to Lucillus*, trans. Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1925–34), 93.6, 101.7. Marcus Aurelius also recommends concentrating on the present moment: 7.54, 8.36, 12.1, 3.10.1; separating oneself from what others say: 12.3.1; taking an objective view, namely, realizing that all things change and dissolve: 3.11, 6.13, 10.11, 10.18.

and all of the consequences of a particular action you might do in response to these features. The thought is that this would prepare you for situations so that there would be fewer surprises than if you'd never thought through them. Another strategy is to analyze what is happening to you into what is "given" and what is your contribution. When you face a conflict (as did all Milgram's subjects and some of the seminarians in a hurry), you can accomplish this by thinking through your various possible responses to the situation and their consequences. (If you stop to help this person, you might end up losing the day, or longer, dealing with him. On the other hand, you might just be late for and be disqualified from the experiment, in which case you'd lose \$1.50 and wouldn't be part of the data. Also, the experimenters might be annoyed with you. If you don't stop, he might die. Or maybe someone else, with more time to spare, will find him—is anyone else likely to come by?)

It may seem that the kinds of ethical deliberation recommended here involve too much theoretical mediation and lead to alienation from the sorts of motives or reasons for action one would want a virtuous or decent and healthy person to have.⁹¹ The recommendations indeed require alienation, but this much alienation is necessary to avoid complacency, crowd following, accepting the constraints on one's action generated by others' expectations of one and other such social cues,⁹² and in general inappropriately unreflective behavior. Further, the recommended strategies are not recommended for situations in which one's default dispositions are just fine (in which engaging in the strategies might cost one valuable time, for example) but, rather, for situations in which one feels conflicted or unsure as to what one should do (as experimental subjects in the Milgram and Darley and Batson experiments reported feeling). Finally, an agent might have recourse to these kinds of deliberation as a check on the choices motivated by her default dispositions—rather than her action being motivated by the thought, 'I want to be like the Good Samaritan, and helping this person get up is what the Good Samaritan would have done, so I'll do it' (which does seem self-absorbed), she would be acting on a disposition to help people in trouble when she can, and then checking, against her ideal conception of virtue: is this what the Good Samaritan would have done, or would he have done something else? There seems nothing objectionably alienated about this.

91. For a perspicuous framing of the problem, including an acknowledgment of the proper place of alienation in moral life, see Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism and the Demands of Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 13 (1984): 134–71.

92. I have in mind here what the psychologist Claude Steele has called one's "social identity"—that set of possibilities for action people internalize as a result of social cues they are given as to what is expected of them. The mental manipulations by which one steps out of one's situation ought to include stepping out of one's social identity.

Even the Stoic statement of the goal of life, living consistently, suggests strategies for taking charge of one's responses to one's situations. Consistency in all areas of one's life may be psychologically easier to achieve than being consistent in just one area. For it takes into account the feedbacks to behavior that do and don't support consistency and makes use of the feedbacks that do support it. For example, suppose I resolve not to be wasteful. It will be hard for me to achieve this on the strength of will power alone, especially if everything else (such as the social and financial costs, my sense of self-worth) is pitted against my will. My resolve can be strengthened by reflection on how my non-wasteful behavior supports my ideals for myself (I want to be environmentally responsible), how it supports consequences I value (my son is less likely to be wasteful if he doesn't see me being wasteful), and so on. I will be more likely not to waste if I can see not wasting as consistent with and supportive of other things that I value, rather than on the strength of my resolve alone. And to do this I will need to think about not only what consistent nonwastefulness demands but also about how not wasting fits in with the other things I think I should be doing (like protecting my son from the scorn of his peers and so allowing him new clothes instead of endlessly patching his old ones, even if buying new clothes is a bit more wasteful). I will also have to think about what impediments I face toward behaving nonwastefully (such as the opinions of others who think nothing of being wasteful) in particular, and behaving well in general.

In giving such practical suggestions, the Stoics are not displaying their notorious hubris; they are responding to a practical question, one even the most convinced situationist surely faces: what can I do so that I'm not just pulled by the puppet strings? It is perhaps not the job of social psychologists to answer this question, but it is the job of moral philosophers to notice that there is this question and that it is not answered by recommending social policies to change situations (which the social psychologists admit is dangerous). Nor is it answered by the recommendation that we avoid situations that will tempt us to behave in ways we do not want to.⁹³ How can I avoid situations in which I'm in a hurry and come across someone needing help? Or situations in which I might be able to obtain something I want by lying or cheating or stealing? Or situations in which I have to choose whether to do as some higher-up tells me or follow my own sense of right and wrong? As individual agents, we can't just rig our situations or wait for our situations to be changed, we often have to act in and upon the situations we find ourselves in. It may turn out that some of the ancient strategies are

93. Doris, "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics," pp. 516–17, and cf. *Lack of Character*, pp. 147–48.

unworkable, but the ancients provide, at the very least, a rich resource of strategies to be considered.

A second point: from the agent perspective, the social psychologists' own studies suggest that the character traits we believe we have exert an influence on our behavior (although it is unclear how much contrary pressure such beliefs would allow us to withstand). Nisbett and Ross cite a study in which children who were told they were neat and concerned about keeping their environment clean cleaned up after themselves and others far more and for far longer than children who were merely encouraged to clean up or children who were told nothing. Similarly, children who were told they were good or hardworking at mathematics improved in mathematics to a greater extent and for a longer time than did children who were told that they should be good at mathematics or should try harder at mathematics.⁹⁴ It is not easy to say why attributions would have this effect: perhaps attributions affect our self-conceptions, which we try to live in accordance with; or perhaps attributions lead us to feel that others expect certain sorts of behavior from us and so to behave as expected. Whatever the exact mechanism(s), this study does not simply testify to the power of the situation (on the grounds that the attribution is situational); for the attributions obviously "stuck" and were internalized by the children. If attributions can have a profound influence on behavior, perhaps self-attributions can as well. We have good reason to suppose self-attributions can affect behavior, because self-attributions need not simply be self-descriptions; they are often also resolutions.⁹⁵

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.⁹⁶ 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.⁹⁷ But the ancients do think that the result of following their recommendations is a character that can be counted on even when the sustaining situational contribution is gone (e.g., when one's peer group isn't looking—although perhaps not forever, because a character can be destroyed). Studies documenting the internalization of group norms support the thought that attitudes formed in the context of one

94. R. L. Miller, P. Brickman, and D. Bolen, "Attribution versus Persuasion as a Means for Modifying Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 31 (1975): 430–41; the neatness study is discussed in Ross and Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation*, pp. 228–30.

95. On self-attributions as resolutions, see Kupperman, p. 248.

96. See Maria Merritt, "Virtue Ethics and the Social Psychology of Character" (Ph.D. thesis, University of California at Berkeley, 1999).

97. For example, Plato, *Gorgias*, 481c–82c, 510ae.

peer group can withstand pressures from other peer groups and other changes in situation (although the question is of course, how much).⁹⁸

Perhaps, if situationism is true, then the answer to the practical question “what can I do to take charge of my situation?” is “nothing”—the features of situations that determine behavior are so subtle and surprising that no ordinary rational strategies could enable us to be masters of our situations. But such pessimism is premature, and if it were ever to become warranted, then it is not only virtue ethics and the notion of character that we would have to jettison, but the power of practical reasoning.

98. Muzafer Sherif (“An Experimental Approach to the Study of Attitudes,” *Sociometry* 1 [1937]: 90–98) asked subjects to estimate how far a pinpoint of light in a completely darkened room had moved. When they were on their own, subjects’ judgments varied considerably, from one inch to several feet, but when they were in pairs or groups of three, their judgments converged into a “group norm.” Once formed, these norms were faithfully adhered to—even as long as a year later, in the absence of the peer group that had formed the norm, and in the company of people who offered very different judgments (described in Ross and Nisbett, pp. 28–29).