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MATTERS OF CHARACTER

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

Notions of character are central to both normative and applied ethics. Over the past 15 years or so, a growing number of philosophers have advanced empirically-based critiques of virtue ethics, arguing for skepticism about character. I show how standard approaches to virtue ethics can be modified so as to avoid these rather damaging empirical critiques. The most promising responses to character skepticism, however, are not always available to virtue ethical approaches to *applied* ethics. In particular, I argue that virtue ethical approaches to business ethics are in need of novel responses to character skepticism or radical revision.

*To my parents, Peggy and George*

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## PREFACE

The outline for this project is as follows. In chapter 1 I provide a general overview of the contemporary virtue ethics tradition, along with its connection to Aristotle's original work on virtue. Additionally, I highlight two major commitments of virtue ethics. First, that the actual possession of particular traits and virtues is essential for right action in numerous virtue ethical accounts. Second, that virtue ethics is aimed at the actual development of virtue as part of its commitment to human flourishing.

In chapter 2, I identify the general situationist argument against virtue ethics, and argue for its key premises. I go on to identify the key empirical commitments of virtue ethics most relevant for the so-called character debate. Generally speaking, virtue ethics is committed to some form of psychological realism and the causal power of traits of character to produce trait-relevant behavior. To broaden the scope of the situationist argument, I identify a range of behaviors that could count as trait-relevant behavior for the virtue ethicist. These include *perception, construal, deliberation, overt behavior, and emotional responses*.

Chapter 3 contains a representative sample of the empirical data cited by situationists. For my own contribution to this part of the debate, I divide the results of the empirical data based on which of the aforementioned trait-relevant behaviors the data shows as having problematic behavioral inconsistency. As a result, I argue that the defender of virtue ethics cannot avoid situationist criticism by attempting to re-locate the behavior most important for trait possession.

In chapter 4 I address recent responses by defenders of virtue ethics that the situationist understanding of consistency is overly focused on objective features of a situation, and ignores the more important psychological features. I argue that recent attempts to redefine consistency



fail. The failure is due to the proposed accounts of consistency being either normatively inadequate or empirically inadequate.

I consider, in chapter 5, promising new approaches to virtue ethics that I believe avoid situationist arguments. Despite avoiding issues of behavioral inconsistency, I still highlight some potential obstacles for these so-called instrumentalist approaches. Additionally, I transition the discussion to character-based approaches in applied ethics.

Finally, in chapter 6, I consider the virtue ethical approach most popular by business ethicists. The approach focuses, in part, on the development of particular traits of character. I argue that the problems posed by situationists are more acute for character-based approaches to business ethics than they are to more general theories of virtue ethics. This is due to the particular practical demands on a normative theory of business ethics, which preclude the standard defenses of virtue ethical theories against situationist criticism. Accordingly, character-based business ethics is in need of novel responses to situationism or radical revision.

# CHAPTER 1: VIRTUE ETHICS

## I. Introduction

The contemporary tradition of virtue ethics, often drawing inspiration from Aristotle, has steadily gathered steam since Anscombe's (1958) rallying call for new directions in moral theorizing. Virtue ethics is sometimes described as one of the three major branches of normative ethics, in company with consequentialism and deontology. Generally speaking, what sets virtue ethics apart from other approaches to normative ethics is a focus on the character of the moral agent, rather than consequences of particular actions or adherence to principles and duties. It should be noted, however, that talk of moral character is certainly not absent from the other branches of normative ethics.<sup>1</sup>

Most versions of virtue ethics discussed in contemporary philosophy follow a broadly Aristotelian tradition, with a focus on virtue (*arete*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*), and flourishing (*eudaimonia*).<sup>2</sup> Much of the discussion throughout this dissertation focuses on this generally Aristotelian approach to virtue ethics.<sup>3</sup> To put the view succinctly, doing the right thing consists in acting from a virtuous character. Acting from a virtuous character consists in the act being intentional in the right kind of way, for the right kinds of reasons, and with the right kind of attitude and feelings towards those actions (Adams 2006: 218, Kamtekar 2004: 479-481, Hursthouse 1999: 123-125). In this chapter, I discuss the major commitments of virtue ethics as understood by its prominent supporters and detractors. In this way, what makes virtue ethics

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Kant develops a view of character in the *Doctrine of Virtue*.

<sup>2</sup> See Annas (2011) and the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue>).

<sup>3</sup> For the remainder of the dissertation, discussion of virtue ethics will refer to a broadly Aristotelian framework. What is entailed by this specific framework is discussed in chapter 2.

distinctive as a normative enterprise, in particular its focus on the development of particular traits of character and personal flourishing, is made clear.

In Section II, I discuss conceptions of character and virtue found throughout the virtue ethics tradition, in particular the understanding of virtue as an ‘excellence’ of character. Section III details the relationship between virtue and right action, along with some attempts in the literature to specifically define right action for virtue ethics. In Section IV I go on to identify some of the specific qualities of the virtues, and what expectations we should have of someone with possession of said virtues. Section V identifies the pre-virtuous states most people will be in throughout their lives, and in Section VI I discuss the importance of virtue development to virtue ethics. Finally, in Section VII, I provide some concluding thoughts that will help frame the discussion in the next chapter regarding recent empirically-based critiques of virtue ethics.

## **II. Virtue & Character (Excellence)**

Virtue is often described as an enduring disposition and quality of an agent that, as is so often quoted, “goes all the way down”.<sup>4</sup> As defenders of virtue ethics take pains to point out, especially in light of recent empirical criticism of virtue ethics, virtue and character are much more than mere overt behavioral dispositions. For example, a generous person is not merely someone who performs generous acts in appropriate circumstances. If this were true, the genuine philanthropists and the corporate CEO looking to decrease their tax liability via charitable donations would both be correctly described as generous. The truly generous individual is generous because of what she values, what she believes, what she’s sensitive to, and not only because of what she does. Character can be contrasted with something like a habit or a personality trait, such as being a vegetarian or laconic.

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., Annas (2010:9) and Hursthouse (1999:11).

The virtuous agent is said to possess an excellent state of character. For Aristotle, this is a particular state or condition (*hexis*) that disposes the possessor to respond in appropriate ways (EN 1105b25-6). Aristotle goes on to describe virtue as an intermediate between two extremes (EN 1106a26-b28). For example, the virtue of *Courage* is a state between cowardice and brashness. Importantly, the state of virtue is not necessarily in the exact middle of two extremes, but is instead the appropriate condition between two problematic ones. The demands of a particular situation will help specify the appropriateness of certain responses. Expressing virtue can take many forms. Courage, for example, may be rushing to the defense a friend in one case, and remaining hidden while a friend suffers in the other (EN 1106a36-b7). Aristotle is, of course, only the starting point for many in the tradition, and contemporary discussions of character and virtue have gone off in many different directions. Consistent with her more pluralist project, Christine Swanton (2001:38) provides a nice general conception of virtue: “A virtue is a good quality or excellence of character. It is a disposition of acknowledging or responding to items in the field of a virtue in an excellent (or good enough) way.” For Swanton the “field of a virtue” is meant to encompass the relevant areas where the virtue would be applicable. Swanton intends this to be a very general, structural model of virtue ethics that gets filled out by particular theories.

While Aristotle describes the development of virtue as partially a matter of habituation, it is important not to think of character and virtue, in the sense used in virtue ethics, as merely regularity of overt behavior. The exercise of virtue is not an unthinking, mechanical response, though it might include behaviors below the level of conscious thought. On one account, for the virtuous, temptations or considerations of vice are “silenced” in the virtuous individual.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> McDowell (1978).

development of virtue is not a solitary pursuit, as it is sometimes described as needing the appropriate social circle or even a virtuous exemplar.

One account of virtue describes virtue development as analogous to the learning and continued practice of a particular skill. Annas (2011) argues for such a view, where acquiring virtue involves, roughly, an instructor and student-type relation. The student starts on the path of virtue by following the direct commands or suggestions of the instructor. Hursthouse describes such early parts of virtue development as rules we learn at “mother’s knee”.<sup>6</sup> For example, we begin to learn about the virtue of generosity when we are told to share our toys or candy with others. Learning virtue always starts in what Annas labels as an *embedded* context. We do not learn how to be generous by reflecting on abstract principles, but by first being directed how to act generously in specific contexts.<sup>7</sup> As the number of contexts we learn about increases, the hope is that we will start to see commonalities as to what it is generosity demands. Like with any skill, such a model of virtue and action requires a drive to aspire on the part of the agent, so Annas’ model here should not be seen as a passive acquirement of virtue over time. Nor should it be understood as simple mimicry of one’s virtue exemplar. Just as the piano student cannot simply imitate their teacher’s movements to become a skilled piano player, the student of virtue must work to become sensitive to the demands that guide their teacher’s actions.

The skill analogy, while not held by all proponents of virtue ethics, brings out an important distinction made by Aristotle that is common throughout much of the virtue ethics literature. Virtuous action born from mere habit or thoughtless instinct is termed natural virtue, to be contrasted with proper virtue. Natural virtue appears to do the work of virtue, resulting in seemingly virtuous actions, but it is unreflective or simply the product of rote memorization.

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<sup>6</sup> Hursthouse (1999:38).

<sup>7</sup> Annas, (2011: 22)

While we might praise the child for sharing with his friends, to ascribe the full virtue of generosity to the child is inaccurate.

While the above accounts differ somewhat in approach, a common theme throughout is the importance of the development of a virtuous character. Just as acquiring a particular skill or habit effects change in the individual, virtue ethics is meant to change individuals in certain ways. For Aristotle, the development of virtue contributes to the end or purpose (*telos*) of human life. Given the unique human capacity for rational thought, Aristotle thought we should strive to develop that rationality as much as possible.<sup>8</sup> An important part of a virtuous character is the ability to discern and execute the best course of action, given the particulars of the situation. Aristotle's understanding of the human *telos* directly informs his conclusion that contemplation is the highest human good.<sup>9</sup> From the classical account by Aristotle to more contemporary skill-based accounts, the *actual* instantiation of virtuous states of character is an important aim of virtue ethical accounts. The developmental goal of virtue ethics plays an important role throughout the remainder of this dissertation.<sup>10</sup>

### **III. Virtue & Action**

Hursthouse (1999:31) helpfully summarizes an account of right action for virtue ethics: “An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would, characteristically, do in the circumstances.”<sup>11</sup> At first glance, this appears uninformative, since if I am unaware of how the virtuous agent would act, such a summary appears unhelpful. Indeed, it appears to put virtue ethics at a significant disadvantage when compared to its normative competitors. Hursthouse

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<sup>8</sup> See Aristotle Book II, Chapter 3 of the *Physics* and Book I, Chapter 3 of the *Metaphysics*.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle Book X, Chapter 7 of the *Ethics*.

<sup>10</sup> I discuss virtue development in more detail in Section VI.

<sup>11</sup> There are variations throughout the virtue ethics literature as to what constitutes right action, but connection to the character of the virtuous agent remains. For other account see, for example, Tiberius (2006), Russell (2009) and Liezl van Zyl (2011). I just wish to identify that there is a connection between actual virtue possession and right action; the intricacies of the connection between virtue and right action may be set aside.

goes on to argue, however, that consequentialism and deontology can appear to have similar, uninformative accounts of right action:

**Consequentialism:** An action is right iff that action produces the best kind of consequences.

**Deontology:** An action is right iff the action is consistent with the ethical principles.

In each case, an important ethical concept remains undescribed. What are the best kinds of consequences? What are the right ethical principles? In being left in the dark as to what the virtuous agent is like, we are at least no worse off than consequentialism or deontology, at least according to Hursthouse. In each case, the given moral theory needs to fill out important features of the respective normative enterprise. For the virtue ethicist, the question turns to not only *what* the virtuous agent does in the circumstances, but also *how* they perform those actions in a characteristically virtuous way.<sup>12</sup> Here we begin to see some of the early commitments of virtue ethics with respect to right action. While the right action is to be judged by considering what the virtuous agent would do, judgments as to whether or not someone is performing a *right* act requires a particular state of character of the agent in question during the performance of that action. Two agents might perform the same bodily movements, and even act for similar reasons, but if an agent fails to act from the right kind of character and in the right kind of way, that agent fails to act rightly. This understanding of virtue has its roots in Aristotle where virtue is said to require the use of reason in the form of practical wisdom, not just simple consistency with virtuous action (*EN* VI.13 1145a). For virtue ethics, the actual instantiation of a particular state of character in agents is essential to right action.

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<sup>12</sup> For example, see Kamtekar (2004).

Importantly, failure to perform as the virtuous agent would do does not imply that the agent is a bad or vicious person. For instance, children can perform the same bodily movements associated with virtuous action, yet fail to act from a virtuous character. Such acts would hardly be called wrong. For many virtue ethical accounts, possessing virtue is a matter of degree, rather than a binary quality (e.g., Annas 2011:89-91). Additionally, some proponents of virtue ethics, including Hursthouse in later work, have sought to expand and refine the definition of right action. An immediate difficulty, or at least a bit of strangeness, to Hursthouse's original definition of right action are the everyday things a virtuous agent would characteristically do that don't seem to square with what we could consider "right action". For example, the virtuous agent would characteristically brush their teeth twice a day or stretch before a strenuous workout. Given there is no gradation of rightness in the original definition, some everyday tasks seem to be on the same level as laudable acts of courage or compassion.<sup>13</sup> Hursthouse sought to address this issue by providing a definition of supererogatory acts as those which the virtuous agent would characteristically do, but are nevertheless still quite difficult to do.<sup>14</sup> In introducing different classes of right actions, some conception of a gradation of right action might be possible. Whatever the success of this proposal or others might be, the connection of virtue and right action remains throughout the virtue ethical tradition.

Many proponents of virtue ethics argue that the correct conception of right action is that such acts are the product of a particular kind of deliberative process. Virtue provides the ability to respond to the appropriate reasons for action in order to pursue good ends; but possessing virtue, by itself, does not determine what we do. The conception of virtue as responsiveness to reasons needs to be contrasted with an automatic series of predictable reactions to the appropriate

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<sup>13</sup> Russell (2009:112-130) and van Zyl (2014:124-125).

<sup>14</sup> Hursthouse (2006:11).



conditions.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to a habit or automatic response, virtue is best described as guiding us to act and think in particular ways. Describing acting from virtue with respect to our friends, Swanton (2001:40) notes, “A good friend does not merely promote the good of her friend: she appreciates her friend, respects, and even loves her friend. Caring as a virtue involves receptivity, perhaps love in some sense, and to a large extent promotion of good.” Virtue is a complex behavioral disposition, often referred to as a “thick” moral concept, as it encompasses descriptive, evaluative, and even emotional components.<sup>16</sup>

The thickness of virtue concepts, with the wide variety of rational and emotional processes involved with virtuous action, makes Hursthouse’s definition of right action a bit difficult to put into practice. If I’m someone interested in doing the right thing in a particular situation, and I happen to be in a non-virtuous state, it may be very difficult for me to discern what the virtuous individual would, characteristically, do in the circumstances. Indeed, depending on the situation, it may be one that a virtuous individual would never have gotten herself into in the first place, so it’s even harder to imagine what they might do.

Hursthouse resists the move to codify a decision procedure for virtue ethics based purely on what it is the virtuous individual would do in the circumstances.<sup>17</sup> Hursthouse maintains that one needs to exercise virtuous faculties in order to actually do as the virtuous person would. She claims it is a mistake to say something like “The virtuous agent never does what is wrong” since this presupposes a prior identification of wrong action.<sup>18</sup> Without the character or virtue of the virtuous agent, one might not be able to act as the virtuous agent would in the circumstances.

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<sup>15</sup> Kamtekar (2004).

<sup>16</sup> See Williams (1985:140-142;150-152) and Foot (2001;2002). The reading of “behavioral” here should be exceptionally broad. I go into more detail as to how broad in Chapter 2.

<sup>17</sup> Hursthouse (1999:39-42, 56-58).

<sup>18</sup> Hursthouse (1999:73).

The actions must stem from a settled state of character, not merely mimicking what the virtuous agent might do.

As a would-be “competitor” to the traditions of consequentialist and deontology, virtue ethics has been specifically criticized for the kind of anti-codifiability Hursthouse argues for. After all, action guidance is a common desideratum for a normative theory. The need for codifiability is not an uncontroversial claim though. During much of its contemporary development, proponents of virtue ethics have objected to the notion that “proper” ethical theories have clearly defined rules and decision procedures.<sup>19</sup> Aristotle himself resists the idea of a comprehensive rule set, likening the exercise of ethics to that of something like medicine (*EN* 1104a7-10). Doctors do not simply exclusively follow a flow chart when treating patients, as they must exercise skilled judgment in each case, appreciating the complexity of each patient. Hursthouse, while maintaining that right action must come from a virtuous character, comments that it is not as though right action is always a complete mystery to the non-virtuous. It’s commonly accepted that the honest person, for example, is quick to correct false impressions, and makes sure a potential partner in a contract is aware of and understands what they are agreeing to.<sup>20</sup> For a particular class of moral cases, what the virtuous person would characteristically do is not difficult to guess. As a result, Hursthouse claims virtue ethics has sufficient condification for the clear and more unproblematic cases. She goes on to say, however, action guidance breaks down quickly as cases get more complex, as in *how* honest one should be in various circumstances, or exactly *when* it might be better to break a long held

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<sup>19</sup> E.g., McDowell (1979:336).

<sup>20</sup> Hursthouse (1999:11).

promise. In these hard cases, codification becomes unreasonable. In the challenging cases, one needs judgment and moral wisdom of the virtuous agent in order to act rightly.<sup>21</sup>

Hursthouse terms the most difficult cases as “tragic dilemmas”. In a tragic dilemma, none of the options open to an agent seem to fit with what we might normally think of as what the virtuous agent would do. An example of a tragic dilemma is a “Sophie’s Choice” situation where a parent must choose the life of one of their two children over the other. As Hursthouse puts it, it is a situation where a virtuous agent “cannot emerge with her life unmarred.”<sup>22</sup> Tragic dilemmas are sometimes seen as a particular problem for virtue ethics. If either option in the dilemma seems seriously problematic, if one of the options is what the virtuous individual would (characteristically) do in the circumstances, then it should, in fact, be the right thing to do. One alternative is to say something like the virtuous person would never find themselves in a tragic dilemma in the first place. But this is hardly satisfying. After all, the most difficult and trying circumstances are where one might wish to rely on a moral theory the most. In tragic dilemmas, a virtue ethical approach seems to be worse off than a consequentialist or deontological alternative. The consequentialist can be guided by selection of the best among a bad lot of options. While right action for the consequentialist may be difficult to carry out, one can at least appreciate some clarity in why one choice is to be preferred over another. For the deontologist, there may be some weighing of principles or obligations, but there is some guidance about what the relevant considerations actually are. And for some deontologists, they may even take a Kantian line where there are no real tragic dilemmas, as there will always be one option or another where one has a stronger grounds of obligation.<sup>23</sup> The problems in tragic dilemmas appear more acute for the virtue ethicist. While not in principle a structural problem,

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-62.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>23</sup> Kant (2012/1785).

characterizing what seems like an awful action as a right action might cost virtue ethics some of its intuitive appeal.

Hursthouse's proposed solution to tragic dilemmas does much to clarify the virtue ethical account of right action, and this solution has had an important influence on the continued development of virtue ethics. Hursthouse presents the following fuller account of what constitutes right action for a virtue ethicist.<sup>24</sup>

An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would, characteristically, do in the circumstances, except for tragic dilemmas, in which a decision is right iff it is what such an agent would decide, but the action decided upon may be too terrible to be called 'right' or 'good'.

Of note in the above definition is the shift from talk from "right action" to "right decision". In a tragic dilemma, even the virtuous agent, acting from virtue, does not perform a right action, even if it is the right decision. Here, Hursthouse rejects what she describes as the "primacy of character". To maintain the primacy of character is to hold all right action and conceptions of the good is reducible to virtue.<sup>25</sup> Contrary to this point, while virtue is certainly a central ethical concept for virtue ethics, Hursthouse argues that there are other considerations that inform our concept of the good that are separable from virtue. For example, virtue ethics often considers what is good for the human organism, which is more easily understood in terms of biological or other naturalistic concepts. What benefits a human being's health and well-being sometime informs conceptions of virtue.<sup>26</sup> Philippa Foot's discussion of euthanasia, done from the perspective of virtue ethics, includes such discussion of what is good and to the benefit of the human organism.<sup>27</sup> The practice of discussing important moral concepts which are not reducible

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<sup>24</sup> Hursthouse (1999:79).

<sup>25</sup> For example, see Hudson (1986:42-3)

<sup>26</sup> Hursthouse (1999:82).

<sup>27</sup> Foot (1977:54).

to virtue continues in more contemporary accounts of virtue ethics. Lorraine Besser-Jones, for example, highlights the particulars of psychological well-being for human organisms in her account of virtue ethics.

Virtue, while central to most any account of virtue ethics, is not the lone foundation of virtue ethics. It's important to keep this in mind for subsequent discussion of critics of virtue ethics, as they should not be understood as targeting the entirety of the virtue ethics tradition. While the prominent critiques of virtue ethics focus on conceptions of character and virtue, the goal is not the wholesale denial of the entirety of the virtue ethics tradition. Indeed, as I argue in chapter 5, critics of virtue ethics can be understood as showing promising directions for future development of virtue ethics. Hursthouse's identification of important non-virtue moral concepts to the tradition of virtue ethics, in part, opens the door for so-called alternative accounts of virtue.

#### **IV. The Virtues**

Virtues are understood as an enduring feature of the agent. A virtuous person does not act well under some conditions and not others, but across situations and contexts as a result of an appropriate internal constitution. Most virtue ethical accounts posit what have been termed 'global' character traits, which are traits that reliably manifest certain behaviors across a wide variety of trait-relevant situations (Doris 2002, Miller 2013).<sup>28</sup> For example, the courageous individual will reliably behave courageously across a wide variety of courage-relevant situations. But what exactly *are* the virtues? Aristotle, of course, has a list of virtues, with familiar members such as courage, patience, temperance and truthfulness. Among those discussed in everyday conversations are also the virtues of compassion and loyalty. Contemporary discussions of virtue expand on classical lists, or investigate new dimensions of virtues, such as the identification of

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<sup>28</sup> I discuss global traits in more detail in chapter 2.

‘social intelligence.’<sup>29</sup> The specifics of any single virtue would provide enough material for lengthy in-depth discussions. For my purposes though, it is not so much the specifics of the virtue that are most relevant, but rather the implications and structure of virtue possession. Different approaches to virtue ethics will have different commitments to the structure of virtues, so discussions of virtue ethics need to be specific about which traditions are being targeted.

For many accounts of virtue ethics, self-control appears necessary for the development of a variety of virtues, including temperance (the ability to refrain from over-indulgence in sensual pleasures), courage (the ability to face or control one’s fears), and justice (which often requires restraining one’s self-interested motives). Indeed, self-control is often identified as one of the main reasons to understand virtue as a unified whole, rather than discrete character traits one develops individual.<sup>30</sup> For each of the above virtues, and others, a prerequisite of possessing virtue is being the sort of actor who has an enduring disposition to be unmoved by the kinds of feelings and emotions that might overwhelm their capacity to know and desire the right course of action. At times this is also identified as ‘integrity’. An agent with integrity is a unified or whole individual with a strong resistance to distractions, such as short-term pressures or temptations that would interfere with right action.<sup>31</sup> So while there are different ways of understanding particular virtues, their role in guiding the act in certain ways and maintaining some kind of resistance to irrelevant concerns is found throughout discussions of virtue. Miller (2013:208) outlines what he calls ‘platitudes’ about virtue ethics:

- (i) A person who is virtuous, when acting in character, will typically attempt to perform virtuous actions when, at the very least, the need to do so is obvious and the effort involved is very minimal.

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<sup>29</sup> Snow (2010).

<sup>30</sup> Annas (2011:104).

<sup>31</sup> Solomon (1999:328).

- (ii) A person's virtuous trait will not be dependent on the presence (or absence) of certain morally problematic [environmental or personal psychological factors] in leading him to perform virtuous actions, such that if they were or were not present, then his frequency of acting virtuously would significantly increase or decrease in the same nominal situations.
- (iii) A person's virtuous trait will typically lead to virtuous behavior that is done at least primarily for motivating reasons which are morally admirable and deserving of moral praise, and not primarily for motivating reasons which are either morally problematic or morally neutral.
- (iv) A virtuous person, when acting in character, does not regularly act from egoistic motives which are often powerful enough that, were they not present, he would not continue to reliably act virtuously, as his virtuous motives are not strong enough to motivate such behavior by themselves.

These platitudes helpfully identify much of the structure of virtue found throughout the virtue ethics literature. Point (ii) in particular summarizes the importance of things like self-control and integrity of the virtuous agent. Virtue possession implies much about the motivational structure of the agent, not only what reasons for action they are sensitive to, but that certain reasons provide sufficient motivational force for the agent to act. It is hopefully becoming clear that virtues are complex dispositions. As an "enduring feature of the agent," virtue possession provides a deep description of the types of considerations relevant to the agent.

The complexity of virtue makes simply listing various virtues as an explanation of virtue ethics a bit shallow. Recall the example of honesty, where it is expected that most people could come up with a list of things honest people tend to do. But possession of the virtue of honesty

isn't simply telling the full truth at every opportunity. Full disclosure of all of one's inner thoughts and feelings is a sure way to ruin most social gatherings. The virtuous person, in exercising their honesty, provides an "appropriate level" of honesty. The same holds true for things like courage and charity. This is not just a reiteration of the mean between two extremes, but rather to expand on it. Because the particulars of any given *situation* many significantly shift what we think of as virtuous action, there is a general demand for excellent reasoning and deliberation on the part of the agent. Being honest isn't just about doing honest things, but being able to determine what the honest thing actually is, given the particular situation. The crucial point here is that there are numerous aspects of virtue that need to be fleshed out and described by any given account of virtue ethics. This has led to independent investigations of virtue, separable from a version of virtue ethics proper.

Some argue that one cannot truly possess one virtue without possessing all of the others. The practical wisdom, for example, necessary for the appropriate level of truth telling is inseparable from the practical wisdom need for the appropriate level of courage. That idea is that there is really only a single virtue, practical wisdom, or in a slightly weaker form, the possession of one virtue is positively correlated with the possession of others. The coincidence of virtue is sometimes referred to as the 'Unity of the Virtues'.<sup>32</sup> For my purposes in this dissertation, the individuation (or lack thereof) of the virtues matters little. The relevant structure of virtue and the empirical implications of that structure, discussed in more detail in chapter 2, remains the same whether there are many virtues or only a single one.

To be clear, not all theories of virtue, and thus not all versions of virtue ethics, posit similar structures of virtue. Of particular note are *instrumentalist* accounts of virtue. For instrumentalist views, there is no intrinsic value to any particular state of character. A state of

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<sup>32</sup> See Adams (2006) and Russell (2009).



character is valuable insofar as it is instrumentally valuable in bringing about particular states of affairs. Some instrumentalist views focus on traits which produce the best consequences, while others focus on the psychological well-being of the agent themselves. Julia Driver argues for a consequentialist view of virtue where the particular traits of character that are most conducive to bringing about the best possible consequences for others are the virtues. For examples, traits of character that dispose us donating money to charitable causes are virtues, not because of some intrinsic value to selfless donation, but because charities bring about better states of affairs for many people.<sup>33</sup> Lorraine Besser-Jones' view identifies the virtues as those traits which contribute to personal mental health and flourishing. An example of a virtue for Besser-Jones is a trait that contributes to feelings of relatability and inclusion with our peers. Similar to Driver's account, the value of the virtue is *not* from relatedness being an intrinsically valuable trait (as it might be for Aristotle's own virtuous mean for 'social conduct'), but rather that feelings of relatedness contribute to the psychological well-being of human beings.<sup>34</sup> Instrumentalist views are a significant departure from many traditional approaches to virtue ethics, though they still maintain particular traits of character as the primary target of moral concern.<sup>35</sup>

## **V. The Pre-Virtuous State**

While the possession of virtue is one of the developmental goals of virtue ethics, most people aren't in a virtuous state. Indeed, most people will likely never attain full virtue. This raises the question of how we should understand the pre-virtuous states most of us find ourselves in. One way to understand the pre-virtuous states is to identify what it is about such states that make them fall short of virtue ones.

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<sup>33</sup> Driver (2001).

<sup>34</sup> Besser-Jones (2014).

<sup>35</sup> I discuss instrumentalist views in more detail in chapter 5.

Aristotle's original accounting of pre-virtuous states provides a helpful starting point for understanding them. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle identifies such states as internal conditions of disharmony. Symptoms of such states involve agents making a decision about a particular course of action, but then experiencing some kind of passionate interference (*EN* 1166bff). That there is interference of this kind is indicative of a lack of virtue, even if the agent ends up doing what a virtuous agent would in those circumstances. Such people are referred to by Aristotle as "continent" (*enkrates*). Those for whom the passionate interference ends up distributing the intended behavior are "incontinent" (*akrates*). Finally, there are those for whom compassion and justice and the like hold negligible value, and are generally governed by the passions which present difficulty for the continent and the incontinent. These are the vicious or evil people for Aristotle (*kakos; phaulos*).<sup>36</sup> Particularly for the continent and incontinent, a single instance of passionate interference is not sufficient for being completely excluded from the category of virtue. The pre-virtuous states are described as chronic conditions, not one-off events.

The incontinent state is of particular interest not only to virtue ethics as a whole, but also for much of this dissertation. Passionate interference that ends with a failure to act well for the incontinent can be consciously experienced after going through careful deliberation (*propeteia*) or unconsciously guiding the agent as well (*astheneia*) (*EN* 1149aff). This is often described as "akratic" behavior in the virtue ethics literature. While Aristotle goes on to individuate various types of akratic behavior, based on the particular type of passion which does the interfering (e.g., anger, pleasure, etc.), what's important to understand is that this form of chronic interference is short-circuiting what is normally understood to be correct deliberation.

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<sup>36</sup> See the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue>).

Falling short of virtue, then, can take many forms. One can fail to be sensitive to the appropriate kinds of reasons, deliberate about those reasons poorly, or just have that properly reason-sensitive deliberation interfered with by the passions. Such allowances remain in the contemporary virtue ethics tradition as well, for someone acting “out of character” is hardly a strange occurrence, virtuous or otherwise. Hursthouse notes there are numerous ways in which someone may understandably act out of character, as when they are “exhausted, dazed with grief, ill, drunk (through no serious fault of their own, we must suppose), shell-shocked, and so on. These are the sorts of conditions in which we are surprised if people are ‘not themselves’.”<sup>37</sup> For now, it is enough to understand that momentary and understandable lapses in acting well are to be expected, and do not necessarily disqualify someone from being virtuous or continent. But if most of us are in one of the above pre-virtuous states, one can wonder how it is we can approach a more virtuous state. This leads to another important aspect of the virtue ethics tradition – virtue development.

## **VI. Virtue Development**

Thus far I’ve discussed general conceptions of virtue, the relationship between virtue and action, and a few important structural features of virtue. While mentioned in brief earlier, I now turn to the development of virtue in more detail. No one argues that everyone is virtuous from the start, even if we might have many pre-theoretical conceptions of virtue that we learn at “mother’s knee.” Virtue ethics is sometimes described as a theory that answers the question “what kind of person should I be?” rather than “what should I do?” That is, it is agent-focused rather than act-focused. An additional demand on a virtue ethical theory, which might not be found in a consequentialist or deontological theory, is to provide an account of how one could develop, or at least approach, a virtuous state of character.

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<sup>37</sup> Hursthouse (1999:78). See also Adams (2006:148-152).

For many accounts of virtue ethics, going back to Aristotle, habituation is often stressed as a crucial component of virtue development.<sup>38</sup> Habituation leads to virtue because it aids in recognizing certain features of a situation as important reasons for deciding to act in a certain way (*EN* 2.I 1103b). Indeed, virtue has often been likened to, in part, a particular kind of perceptual capacity. McDowell notes, Virtue “On each of the relevant occasions, the requirement imposed by the situation, and detected by the agent’s sensitivity to such requirements, must exhaust his reason for acting as he does.”<sup>39</sup> The early development of virtue is often situation specific, viz., one learns to be honest by simply being told to tell the truth on a particular occasion. Annas notes that we slowly build our conceptions of virtue “in a multitude of embedded contexts, which can stand in various relations, from overlapping to conflicting ... often it is not obvious at the time that we are learning to be generous or brave in learning how [to] do things; most people discern this only much later.”<sup>40</sup> But even outside of the context of Annas’ skill analogy, the importance of practice and reflection is cited as crucial for virtue development. In other work, Annas observes that “virtue is developed through intelligent decisions and results in more intelligent deliberation and decision.”<sup>41</sup>

Similar to developing virtues from an embedded context, other accounts of virtue development cite the importance of virtues with a much more narrow scope than normally assumed. For instance, developing a virtue of honesty within my personal relationships, even if I seem to lack such a virtue in my professional life. This is sometimes described as the “modularity of virtues”, where virtue development is sometimes a result of collecting individual

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<sup>38</sup> E.g., Snow (2010:31-38), Annas (2011:17ff).

<sup>39</sup> McDowell (1979:332)

<sup>40</sup> Annas (2010: 21-22).

<sup>41</sup> Annas (2005:638).

virtue-like component parts.<sup>42</sup> One can think of this as slowly assembling the parts to a larger machine. Each component should be properly tuned and in good working order, but one fails to have the larger machine until all of the parts are united in the right kind of way. The modularity account is a bit different than habituation. Habituation involves progression towards fully virtuous action, with virtue developing as one comes to appreciate important similarities in difference between all of the various contexts. As Snow notes, “if a trait starts out by being narrow and local, perhaps as a response to a subjective interpretation of one type of objective situation or encounter, it need not remain confined to the same type of objective situation, but can be generalized across objectively different situation-types.”<sup>43</sup> Within the modularity account, however, one might be able to act exactly as the virtuous agent would act, just in a more limited scope.

Despite some variety in conceptions of virtue, and how it might be developed in any given individual, one important takeaway from this part of the virtue ethics tradition is the importance of actual instantiation of particular traits. Virtue ethics not only frames the virtuous agent as an evaluative standard and the criteria for right action, but also as a developmental goal for a given agent. Certainly, there is no expectation that all people will develop into the virtuous agent. And even for those that might reach the virtuous state, the expectation is often described as a life-long pursuit – hardly something to be picked up in a few years. The point remains though that much of virtue ethics focuses on agent acquiring particular traits, and that these traits are to assist in not only right action, but human excellence on the whole.

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<sup>42</sup> Snow (2010: 31ff).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

## VII. Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter, I've provided a general overview of the virtue ethics tradition, and its primary domains of focus. Right action, for the virtue ethicists, involves the characteristic exercise of particular traits of character, namely virtues. Virtues are not only important for right action, but also concern the overall well-being of the agent. To be virtuous is not only to do the right thing in most cases, but to also be an excellent human being. Like any great moral tradition in philosophy, particular accounts of virtue ethics will part ways on various important issues. It has not been my goal to identify the most-promising or most-popular accounts of virtue ethics, but merely to highlight what sets virtue ethics apart from other normative traditions. While proponents of virtue ethics are sure to be concerned with the consequences of actions, or the value of principles of duty and obligation, such concerns are often secondary to the concept of virtue. Importantly though, the important moral concepts of virtue ethics are not all reducible to virtue. While right action may be inseparable from virtue, other goods and excellences of human beings have important relevance for virtue ethics as well.

While the technical details of virtue ethics can be as complex and intricate as any other moral theory, virtue ethics is often described as having the appeal of recruiting evaluative concepts most people make use of in their day-to-day life. We praise the compassionate and condemn the dishonest. As Annas notes, "part of the attraction of an ethics of virtue has always been the point that virtue is familiar and recognizable by all."<sup>44</sup> The familiar and strong connection to personal psychology, however, has recently opened virtue ethics up to a particular brand of empirical-based criticism. While naturalistic challenges to moral theories are by no means novel, the strong connection of virtue ethics to particular dispositional structures and the importance for character development has set the stage for a particular brand of empirical-based

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<sup>44</sup> Annas (2010: 173).

critique. While I've gestured at some general empirical commitments in the preceding discussion, more specific details are needed in order to identify any particular vulnerability for certain forms of virtue ethics. In the next chapter, I outline the most threatening form of empirical-based criticism of virtue ethics, as well as the specific empirical commitments many theories of virtue ethics have which makes the empirical criticism applicable in the first place.

## CHAPTER 2: SITUATIONISM AND EMPIRICAL COMMITMENTS OF VIRTUE

### I. Introduction

*Situationism* has a long history in psychology.<sup>1</sup> More recently, it has emerged as a philosophical view as well, primarily critiquing various versions of virtue ethics.<sup>2</sup> Situationists argue that, given the available empirical data, we should be highly skeptical of the widespread of instantiation of particular kinds of character trait in the adult population.<sup>3</sup> The skeptical claim of situationists is that the ethical understanding of character - consisting in *global* traits effecting consistent behavior across differing situations --is undermined by a large body of findings in empirical psychology. Put simply, the situationist claim is that people don't often behave as consistently as familiar theories of character would have us expect. The primary challenge to virtue ethical theories is that the developmental goal of a virtuous character (or even near-virtuous character) is much too unrealistic, given its commitment to global character traits. As a result, the situationist empirical claim is sometimes paired with a normative claim that traditional notions of virtue should be eliminated from ethical thought. For the remainder of this work, I refer to the ongoing philosophical debate between situationists and defenders of virtue ethics as the *character debate*. In this chapter, I outline the general situationist argument against virtue ethics and identify the empirical commitments of virtue ethics which make it vulnerable to the situationist argument in the first place.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Ross and Nisbett (1991), Mischel (1968), and Shoda (1999).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this work, I refer only to philosophical situationists, and so drop any additional qualifier.

<sup>3</sup> Most notably, Doris (2002), Harmon (1999), Merritt (2000).



Defenders of virtue ethics have argued that situationists claim character does not exist at all,<sup>4</sup> or that situationists can only threaten crude versions of character related to automatic, non-rational mechanical processes.<sup>5</sup> Situationists have argued that broadly Aristotelian versions of virtue ethics require firm and unchanging characters that yield predictable, overt behavior,<sup>6</sup> or that virtue ethics requires wide-spread instantiation of certain virtuous traits.<sup>7</sup> These descriptions misrepresent both sides of the character debate. In this chapter, in order to avoid contributing to this unproductive discussion, I identify the strongest version of the situationist argument, and argue for the specific empirical commitments made by various virtue ethical theories in order to clarify the landscape of the character debate. As was pointed out in chapter 1, there is no single theory of virtue ethics. Despite this, there is enough commonality among virtue ethical theories that some clear empirical commitments do exist. Importantly, the empirical commitments I identify should not be construed as necessary for all versions of virtue ethics – different theories have different commitments. After clarifying both the situationist argument against virtue ethics and the specific empirical commitments of many virtue ethical theories, the strength of the empirical evidence cited by situationists can be better evaluated.

In sections II – IV, I layout the general situationist argument, and argue for key premises. In section V, I consider the one of the most common responses to situationist arguments that virtue is a rare ideal, and argue why it fails to address the situationist argument. Section VI describes the limits of the situationist argument, while Section VII concerns potential candidates for the relevant type of behavior that is indicative of trait and virtue possession. Section VIII

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., Annas (2005).

<sup>5</sup> Kamtekar (2004).

<sup>6</sup> Alfano (2013).

<sup>7</sup> Harman (2009).

identifies broader empirical commitments of virtue ethics. Finally, I conclude in Section IX and set the stage for an in-depth discussion of the empirical data in next chapter.

## II. The Situationist Argument against Virtue Ethics

Situationists argue that *global* character traits are not widely instantiated in the adult population, and that *global* character traits are essential to virtue ethical understandings of character and virtue.<sup>8</sup> Both critics and defenders of virtue ethics alike understand a character trait to be global if it is both *consistent* and *stable*.<sup>9</sup> A trait is consistent if trait-relevant behavior reliably manifests across a wide variety of trait-relevant situations. Sara's honesty is consistent because she performs the honesty-relevant behavior in most or all aspects of her life. That is, she is honest at home, at work, when she is with friends, and when she is traveling, to name only a few. A trait is stable if trait-relevant behavior manifests over time in the same way in similar trait-relevant situations. Sara's honesty is stable if her honesty is an enduring feature of her over time.<sup>10</sup> 'Behavior' should be understood very broadly and not merely overt behavior. While behavior can certainly include overt behavior, the type of behavior identified as relevant for trait or virtue possession varies among virtue ethical theories. Part of the strength of the situationist argument is that it applies to such a broad range of behaviors. Potential types of behaviors indicative of trait possession are discussed in detail in Section VII.

The general situationist argument against virtue ethics is best understood as follows:<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> At times in the debate, "robust" has been used instead of "global". Nothing turns on the particular phrasing. For consistency, I only refer to global traits.

<sup>9</sup> For situationists, see Doris (2002:22); Merritt et al. (2010), Alfano (2013:62), and for defenders of character/virtue ethics see Miller (2003), Russell (2009), Snow (2010), and Annas (2011).

<sup>10</sup> "Evaluative integrability" is also cited as a feature of global traits, which implies that possession of certain traits (virtues in particular) is probabilistically related to the possession of similar traits. This feature receives little attention in the character debate, so I leave it aside.

<sup>11</sup> Modified from Merritt et al. (2005).

- (1) If systematic (e.g., scientific) observation reveals pervasive behavioral inconsistency, then behavior is not typically governed by global traits.
- (2) Systematic observation reveals pervasive behavioral inconsistency.
- (3) So, behavior is not typically governed by global traits.
- (4) If behavior is not typically governed by global traits, then virtue ethical theories committed to global traits have little relevance to humans such as they are.

*Therefore,*

- (5) Virtue ethical theories committed to global traits have little relevance to humans such as they are.

There are, of course, other ways of articulating the situationist argument.<sup>12</sup> The above formulation, however, captures the generality and main tenants of situationism. Other descriptions of the general situationist argument often focus on virtues and vices, rather than character traits in general. Furthermore, situationism has often been misinterpreted as an argument for the nonexistence or impossibility of character traits.<sup>13</sup> This, despite rather clear claims to the contrary made by prominent situationists.<sup>14</sup>

While the above argument is valid, there is obviously disagreement as to its soundness. In the coming sections I clarify key premises in the argument, and argue for their truth. An argument for (2) requires extensive review of the available empirical evidence, which will be the focus of chapter 3.

### **III. Pervasive Behavioral Inconsistency**

Premise (1) of the general situationist argument states that, “If systematic (e.g., scientific) observation reveals pervasive behavioral inconsistency, then behavior is not typically governed

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<sup>12</sup> Miller (forthcoming: 192), and Alzola (2008:347; 2012:348).

<sup>13</sup> Flanagan (2009:55), Sreenivasan (2002).

<sup>14</sup> E.g., Doris and Stich (2005).

by global traits.” As stated above, since global traits require consistency, observable inconsistency is a potential threat to the possession of global traits. Importantly though, it is an inconsistency in *behavior*. As stated earlier, the rich literature of virtue ethics does not settle on any single type of behavior as the one most relevant for the possession of particular character traits or virtues. For the situationist argument to be as relevant to virtue ethics as it is purported to be, “behavioral inconsistency” should be read as including a broad range of behaviors. Situationist arguments do not, for example, merely target versions of virtue ethics focused on overt behavior, but instead threaten a wide variety of virtue ethical accounts.

Not just any inconsistency will do for the situationist argument though, as (1) requires a pervasive behavioral inconsistency. The inconsistency is pervasive insofar as it occurs in multiple situations and contexts as opposed to some kind of isolated inconsistency. For example, if the situationist were to argue that behavioral inconsistency found during the commute to work were enough to undermine virtue ethics, the situationist argument would be understandably suspect. The behavioral inconsistency should be widespread.

But what is it to behave inconsistently? If people act compassionately one day to a stranger-in-need and indifferent the next, is this enough to support the situationist charge of inconsistency? Even assuming that we are talking about the relevant kind of behavior, this isn’t necessarily the kind of inconsistency the situationist relies on for their argument. Going by the general definition mentioned above, the inconsistency would be trait-relevant behavior not reliably manifesting across the relevant trait-relevant situations. The conditions that support the appropriateness of particular behaviors in one situation should support them when the conditions occur again (absent appropriate countervailing conditions). Keeping with the above example, a shift in the compassion I show the stranger-in-need should be accompanied by a shift in those

factors deemed appropriate for governing compassion. For example, assume I help a stranger-in-need one day, but fail to the next. If it came to light that my failure to help was in a situation the rendering of aid would put me in severe danger (which was not present in the first case), a charge of inconsistency is hardly appropriate. But if the shift in behavior is attributed to *irrelevant* changes in the situation, one can start doubting the consistency of my compassion.

The natural question here is what counts as an irrelevant change in the situation. Situationists appear to rely on general intuitive agreement about what kinds of things count as irrelevant changes. Merritt et al. (2005) note that situationism is supported by “just how *insubstantial* the situational influences that produce troubling moral failures seem to be.”<sup>15</sup> Earlier works by Doris (2002) and Harman (1999) make similar claims. The reliance here appears to be something like relevant factors being defensible as a reason for the behavior. This is, of course, quite amenable to discussions of virtue ethics. Russell (2009:344) notes, “Acting from or exercising a virtue is one kind of acting for a reason” and Hursthouse (2003:127) argues that virtue is “the wholehearted acceptance of a certain range of considerations as reasons for action.” The situationist is highlighting situational factors that appear to have a significant impact on behavior, but that are largely indefensible as a reason for action. So for premise (1), the thought is that if there is enough systematic observation of significant behavioral influence by indefensible situational factors, this is sufficient evidence for the behavioral inconsistency, which undermines possession of global traits. Virtues are a type of global traits, so if most people fail to even have non-virtuous global traits, the prospect of possessing virtuous traits becomes even more problematic. I consider this line of thought in more detail in Section V.

Another important aspect of the argument is that inconsistency is not secured by single failures of consistency. The situationist argument is not an argument based single failures to act

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<sup>15</sup> Merritt et al. (2005:357), original emphasis.

consistently. Situationists readily admit that direct evidence for or against a particular person's possession of one kind of character trait or another would require long term, systematic observation of that individual.<sup>16</sup> Instead, in interpreting experimental results to support their argument, situationists are best understood as appealing to inference to the best explanation. Having an "off-day" or momentary lapse of character makes sense when considering a single person. However, to claim that the results of so many of the studies cited by situationists are best explained by so many participants having their "off-day", rather than the experimental conditions, strains credulity. Again, one of the empirical claims made by situationists is that most people's behavior is pushed around by irrelevant factors. As noted in Merritt et al. (2005:357): "it is not that people fail standards for good conduct, but that people can be induced to do so with such ease." Christian Miller argues evidence cited by situationists to support inconsistency points to "surprising" factors that significantly impact our behavior.<sup>17</sup> What it is we actually respond to seems to vary widely, resulting in inconsistent behavior.

Inconsistency then is to be understood as changes in behavior when the *relevant* situational factors have remained constant, but only *irrelevant* factors have changed. Again, going back to the example of showing compassion to the stranger-in-need, on the subsequent occasion where I failed to help the stranger-in-need, it would need to be the case that the only difference between the situations are irrelevant ones for it to be a case of inconsistency. The natural question to ask here is what exactly differentiates an irrelevant factor for a relevant one. I provide specific criteria for identifying such factors in chapter 3. My goal here was to link behavioral inconsistency with changes in a particular type of factor.

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<sup>16</sup> Doris (2002:38).

<sup>17</sup> Miller (forthcoming).

Although the focus this section, including and my own examples, has referenced overt behavior, I want to re-emphasize that the situationist argument does not only apply to character traits associated with overt behavior. In the next section, I provide reasons to accept (4). As stated earlier, the evidence for (2) is discussed in detail in chapter 3, and (3) is merely an application of modus ponens of (1) and (2).

#### **IV. Relevance of Humans Such As They Are**

Premise (4) is the final component of the argument that demands some further justification. Premise (4) states “If behavior is not typically governed by global traits, then virtue ethical theories committed to global traits have little relevance to humans such as they are.” This is an exceptionally strong claim that requires additional clarification.

From its beginning, the character debate has been about virtue ethical theories that deal with global traits. While there is disagreement over what kind of behavior matters for global trait possession, a commitment to global traits remains. Importantly, premise (4) restricts the situationist argument to only those virtue ethical theories that cite the importance actual virtue possession, such as those theories which require at least something similar to a virtue in order to secure right action. Premise (4) amounts to the following: if the vast majority of people lack global traits (to say nothing of a virtue), the developmental goal of virtue possession is problematic for human beings such as they are. In short, virtues are not just sensitivities to a particular class of reasons, but a different *kind* of sensitivity entirely.

Despite there being good reasons to accept premise (4), I actually think this is where defenders of virtue ethics have the most promise for pushing back on the situationist argument. If there were a robust account of how one might go about developing global traits of character from typical states of character, the prospect of then reaching the further goal of virtuous global traits

would be much more plausible. To my knowledge, however, no one has argued for such an account.<sup>18</sup> Another way of resisting (4) is to highlight the rarity of virtue, and that widespread behavior contrary to virtuous behavior is not at all a problem for virtue ethics. This way of resisting (4) has become known as the *rarity response* to situationism, which is the focus of the next section.

## V. The Rarity Response to the Situationist Argument

Thus far, I've outlined the situationist argument against virtue ethics, and argued for most of the premises.<sup>19</sup> In response to the situationist, some have claimed that the situationist argument merely demonstrates the difficulty of being a virtuous agent.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the difficulty of virtue is hardly a surprise, and doesn't require evidence from empirical psychology to back it up. From some of the earliest versions for virtue ethics, stretching back to Aristotle, attaining virtue is described as a life-long endeavor. Furthermore, virtue possession also requires specific kinds of education, social support, and dedication on the part of the moral agent.<sup>21</sup> That experimental results show a great many people fail standards of right action, for whatever reason, is not only unsurprising, but platitudinous. Call this the *rarity response* to situationism.

Before the character debate gained wide-spread attention, Doris anticipated the rarity response to situationist evidence. Doris notes that defenders of virtue ethics, "can argue as follows: the situationist research may show that the ordinary person's character is not as sturdy as we might hope . . . such disappointing demographics are exactly what the virtue theorist would expect."<sup>22</sup> Doris goes on to argue that virtue being an exceptionally rare ideal may cause

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<sup>18</sup> It's worth noting both psychological and philosophical work has begun investigating virtue development more seriously, which might offer defenders of virtue ethics a promising response to the situationist argument. See Snow (ed.) (2014).

<sup>19</sup> With a promise to return to the empirical data in chapter 3.

<sup>20</sup> For examples of this defense, see Sreenivasan (2002), Miller (2003), Kamtekar (2004), Annas (2005).

<sup>21</sup> E.g., Annas (2011) stresses the importance of some kind of teacher of virtue.

<sup>22</sup> Doris (1998: 511).



problems for moral education, since it seems strange to hold up a goal that so few could ever attain.<sup>23</sup> But if this were all the situationist was after, one might expect the general situationist argument to have a premise that stated “behavior is not typically governed by *virtuous* traits.” But this discussion is about *global* traits, not just virtuous ones. This seemingly misunderstanding of the target of situationism is why the rarity response fails.

Notice how in describing the rarity response, talk has importantly shifted to the rarity of virtue, rather than the rarity of global traits. These are two very different claims. As I’ve pointed out, the situationist is best understood as claiming the later, though that certainly implies a rarity of virtue. If even morally undemanding global traits are also rare, then even something like Aristotle’s continent moral agent might be far out of reach for the regular person.<sup>24</sup> Far from being a potential defense for virtue ethics, a rarity response which properly interprets the situationist argument accepts the rarity of *global* traits. This simply concedes a key premise to the situationist, premise (3) above.

Even when focusing on virtue, as pointed out by Jesse Prinz, the rarity response presupposes the developmental issue I’ve been discussing. In claiming that human beings could potentially become virtuous presupposes the development of psychological structures necessary for global character traits. Certainly, the evidence cited by situationists has not proven global trait structures are impossible to develop. With Prinz, I think the wealth of experimental data puts the burden of proof is on the defenders of virtue ethics to show why it is reasonable to think human beings could even possess global character traits.<sup>25</sup>

To sharpen the above point here a bit, what is, at best, rare is possession of the kind the ability to respond in a consistent manner across situations that might only differ in minor,

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<sup>23</sup> Doris & Stich (2005: 120).

<sup>24</sup> Doris & Stich (2005).

<sup>25</sup> Prinz (2009: 125).

morally irrelevant ways. The inconsistency in behavior demonstrated by the empirical evidence cited by situationists points to a psychology consisting of global traits is one that is different in *kind* compared to most people, rather than a difference in *degree*. A psychology consisting in global traits seems discontinuous from the vast majority of the population.

Consider an extreme, though instructive example. One could develop a normative theory of human athletic ability that claims a developmental goal of possessing the ability to compete at the top Olympic levels in weightlifting, marathon running, and gymnastics. But is this really an appropriate developmental goal for human beings such as they are? Certainly there are baseline habits related to developing skills in all the above sports that would be beneficial for people to practice. But given what we know about the limits of the human body, having the right balance of strength, agility, and endurance to compete at such a high level in all of these sports seems highly implausible. At the very least, I think we would expect a proponent of this normative account of human athletic ability to give us some idea of how someone could possibly start to work towards this physical ideal.

Another reason to doubt the appropriateness of the rarity response is that evidence cited by situationists does not only concern situations where one might think the possession of virtue is needed for right action. The failure to respond consistently in even low-demand situations is supported by numerous experimental studies, reviewed more thoroughly in chapter 3, where subjects are presented with relatively undemanding opportunities to act in a way consistent with common notions of honesty and decency. One study found that making a room slightly darker led to more people cheating on a test in order to earn more money for themselves.<sup>26</sup> That same study found that cheating behavior also increased when subjects were wearing sunglasses. Another study found people in an office environment were less likely to abstain from

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<sup>26</sup> Zhong et al. (2010).

contributing to the communal beverage fund in the break room when there was a picture of human eyes posted on the wall.<sup>27</sup> The rare feature among these participants appears to be an ability to consistently respond to very low-demanding reasons for acting honestly. Again, it is not as though such studies show a failure of living up to the highest standards of virtue.

Without any apparent baseline of global trait structures, the virtue ethical goal of developing a particular type of global trait, namely virtues, becomes much more daunting. Here is where the point about virtue ethics having “little relevance to humans such as they are” becomes clearer. The discontinuity between the standard psychological structures of most human beings, viz. non-global traits, and the particular goals of many virtue ethical theories, the attainment of virtuous, global traits, demands a developmental account on the part of the virtue ethicist. In short, many of the versions of virtue ethics discussed in chapter 1 are at best incomplete.<sup>28</sup> The long tradition of virtue ethics as a normative theory encouraging the development of a particular type of agent is one of the main reasons is open to the type of criticism offered by situationists.

To take stock for a moment, so far I’ve outlined the situationist argument against virtue ethics and, with the exception of the empirical claim in premise (2) that will be discussed in chapter 3, argued for each of the premises. I then went on to argue why the most common response to the situationist argument, the rarity response, fails to address situationist worries. The reasons why the *rarity response* fails supports (4) in the general situationist argument as well.

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<sup>27</sup> Bateson et al. (2006).

<sup>28</sup> There is a similarity between *ideal* and *non-ideal theory* in political philosophy. After first, for example, establishing an ideal, and perhaps even unrealistic picture of a just government, *non-ideal theory* seeks to bridge the gap between present conditions and the *ideal* goal. What I see virtue ethics as missing is a bridge to the ideal of global traits from what we currently know about human psychology. See Rawls (1971) for more on this distinction between *ideal* and *non-ideal* theory.

The remainder of this chapter concerns the limits of the situationist argument and specific empirical commitments found in various versions of virtue ethics. Since the situationist argument is based on empirical evidence, it is important that virtue ethical theories actually have empirical commitments in the first place. In particular, that whatever kind of behavior is identified to be the trait-relevant behavior in a given virtue ethical theory is both empirically trackable and what it means for that behavior to be inconsistent is coherent.

## **VI. The Limits of the Situationist Argument**

This section may seem to be an odd inclusion to this chapter, as there are a great many things that the situationist argument isn't about. The topic, however, is of great importance, given the landscape of the character debate. Too often the situationist argument has been cast as a claim about the non-existence of character traits, full stop. People on both sides of the character debate typically *agree* that traits exist; the question concerns how traits are *best construed*.<sup>29</sup> The disagreement, as this chapter has meant to point out, is over the existence of global traits. Situationism is not a Skinner-esque version of behaviorism. As Alfano (2013:74-75) notes, while overt behavior is usually highlighted, situationists also target other processes like deliberation and construal. Admittedly, early philosophical papers by those friendly to the situationist line have contributed to the misrepresentation of the situationist position.<sup>30</sup> Early, bold moves in any particular philosophical debate are hardly rare, but unfortunately many people taking part in the character debate continue to reference those early moves as being representative of the situationist position.<sup>31</sup> Those friendly to the situationist position have even argued for a revisionary view of character traits, such as so-called “local trait” theory.<sup>32</sup> Such views posit the

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<sup>29</sup> Doris (forthcoming).

<sup>30</sup> The Harman (1999) paper entitled “The Non-Existence of Character Traits” comes to mind.

<sup>31</sup> E.g., Alzola (2008).

<sup>32</sup> E.g., Doris (2002); Upton (2009).

existence of character traits, just not global character traits. Such local trait views do not evade empirical criticism either, though they are not the target of the situationist argument.<sup>33</sup> Most, if not all, situationists remain interactionists: features of the situation interact with our psychology (character traits, personality traits, etc.) to produce behavior. The disagreement is over the *types* of traits that we have or could reasonable develop.

Situationists also do not argue for the elimination of any and all talk of virtue ethics. As referenced in chapter 1, and made more explicit in chapter 5, there are virtue ethical theories which are not at all threatened by situationist arguments. With the situationist argument in full view, along with its limits, I turn to specific types of empirical commitments made by certain virtue ethical theories with respect to potential behaviors of interest. In each case where the behavior is identified, the expectation on the part of the virtue ethicist is that the behavior will manifest across different situations when appropriate to a reasonable degree or regularity.

## **VII. Virtue and Trait-Relevant Behavior**

Recall that the situationist argument largely rests on the observation of pervasive behavioral inconsistency. Generally speaking, a trait is consistent if trait-relevant behavior reliably manifests across a wide variety of trait-relevant situations. The types of trait-relevant behaviors situationists claim to be inconsistent are those types of behaviors associated with virtue possession. This raises the question of what exactly are the trait-relevant behaviors associated with virtue possession. After identifying the behavior(s), it can be determined if the specific behavior(s) are subject to the kind of inconsistency situationists base their argument

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<sup>33</sup> Alfano (2013:74-76); Miller (2014).

on.<sup>34</sup> In this section, I identify the most prominent types of behavior associated with virtue possession in the virtue ethics literature.

### ***a. Perception***

The virtuous agent is at times described as being more sensitive to noticing the demands of particular situations via a well-developed perception. McDowell describes this perception as a certain kind of detection of situational features.<sup>35</sup> He goes on to make the stronger claim that a non-virtuous agent couldn't even have the same kind of perceptions as that of the virtuous agent.<sup>36</sup> Swanton notes that virtue is, in part, a disposition to acknowledge those items relevant to virtue, which can include perception.<sup>37</sup> So for some accounts of virtue, perception itself, distinct from any deep interpretation, constitutes an important part of virtue possession.<sup>38</sup> Perception, of course, does not exhaust any conception of virtue. Perception is often grouped with some of the further behaviors discussed below.

### ***b. Construal***

No agent, virtuous or otherwise, is simply a passive receptor of unmitigated sense data about the real world. There is always some element of interpretation on the part of the agent. How an agent interprets or understands a particular situation is their *construal* of the situation. Perceiving particular aspects of a situation and construing those same aspects in a certain kind of way are two separate, though still related, processes. I can perceive someone lying on the ground, bleeding, without necessarily construing them as in danger, or in need of help, or even in need of help *by me*. The importance of construal figures predominantly in more recent responses

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<sup>34</sup> See also Murray (2014:714). Murray uses terminology of “primary constituents of character,” where I just refer to various types of behaviors.

<sup>35</sup> McDowell (1979:332).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 334.

<sup>37</sup> Swanton (2001:19).

<sup>38</sup> See also Wiggins (1975) and DesAutels (2012:335).

to situationist arguments against virtue ethics (discussed in detail in chapter 4). In broad strokes, focusing on construal shifts focus from how we might describe a situation from a 3<sup>rd</sup> person point of view to the 1<sup>st</sup> person point of view of the agent. How the individual agent construes a particular situation is often described as an important part of virtue possession. Snow notes that as an agent “cultivates her virtue and it becomes second nature to her, her virtuous disposition will cause her to see or interpret the world in certain ways.”<sup>39</sup> In evaluating an agent’s behavior, Russell argues that the standard of the behavior should be with respect to how the agent themselves construes or interprets the situation, and that there is a virtuous perspective that one can work toward achieving.<sup>40</sup> Some, like Kamtekar, even take differences in construal to be indicative of agents being in different situations, despite objective features generally being the same. This is similar to McDowell’s point about virtuous agents not even being in the same situation as most of us because of their particular kind of perception.<sup>41</sup>

### *c. Deliberation*

Rational deliberation and practical reasoning are also behaviors associated with virtue. The virtuous agent possesses a particular faculty of deliberation that assists in selection of right action.<sup>42</sup> The deliberation can take on various forms, from calculating consequences, weighing competing duties, or even determining what obligations might be on the virtuous agent in the first place. Whatever the particulars of the process may be, the important point is that deliberation involves the selection of a particular course of action among the available choices. Another way of putting it is what actions produced by deliberation are more fully one’s own than

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<sup>39</sup> Snow (2010: 89).

<sup>40</sup> Russell (2009: 326).

<sup>41</sup> See also Kamtekar (2004: 470-471).

<sup>42</sup> E.g., Annas (2005:638; 2011) and Kametekar (2004).

others.<sup>43</sup> At one point, Aristotle himself describes virtue as “a state of character concerned with choice.”<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere, Aristotle notes, “Virtues are expressions of our choice, or at any rate, imply choice.”<sup>45</sup> In deliberation, one needs available options to choose from, the determination of which does not necessarily need to be involved with the deliberation itself. Dylan Murry, who advocates for deliberation being the sole trait-appropriate behavior for virtue, notes, “in order to *choose* one from among competing options, one must already be aware that there are options and of what they are.”<sup>46</sup> Deliberation need not be conscious either, as unconscious choice is a well-known phenomenon, and there is no good reason to disassociate it from virtue.

#### ***d. Overt behavior***

Much of the situationist evidence draws on accounts of overt behavior from social psychology experiments. This has undoubtedly contributed to the misconception that situationists are only targeting non-rational, mechanistic views of character.<sup>47</sup> The claim is that situationists expect the appropriate character trait to be relatively situation-insensitive, and should result in particular overt behavior regardless of the circumstances.<sup>48</sup> The jump from situationists focusing on overt behavior to situationists only targeting mechanistic character traits, however, is much too quick. Whatever else a theory of virtue posits, overt behavior is certainly important, sometimes even necessary for the possession certain virtues in some cases.<sup>49</sup> To possess a character trait or virtue that *never* contributes to behavior would be an exceptionally odd account for of virtue ethics. Fortunately, there are numerous accounts of virtue ethics that do

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<sup>43</sup> Murray (2014:715n10).

<sup>44</sup> *NE* 1106b35-1107a3.

<sup>45</sup> *NE* 1106a2-4. I do not claim any interpretive authority of Aristotle, and merely include these selections in order to highlight the connection between deliberation to virtue.

<sup>46</sup> Murray (2014:717).

<sup>47</sup> E.g., Kamtekar (2004; 2011), Annas (2002; 2011).

<sup>48</sup> Kamtekar (2004: 477).

<sup>49</sup> Hursthouse (1999), Adams (2005).



cite the importance of regularity in overt behavior, even if it is sensitive to situational variation.<sup>50</sup> None of this is to the exclusion of other considerations of character, such as how an agent deliberates and decides, emotional states, or what she cares about or takes as reasons to act, and subjective construal of the particular situation.

Of the potential trait-relevant behaviors I consider, overt behavior is the most discussed type in the character debate. Most of the psychological studies that situationists draw on concern observations of overt behavior on the part of experimental subjects. Overt behavior should be understood as actions taken by an agent that are recognizable to a 3<sup>rd</sup> party observer. Nussbaum notes that virtue includes patterns of commitment and conduct.<sup>51</sup> Adams also cites behavioral acts as important (though not exhaustive) of virtue: “If [virtues] are to have the excellence that qualifies them as virtues, they should not be impotent in the shaping of [overt] behavior ... [virtues] should normally involve [overt] behavioral dispositions of some sort.”<sup>52</sup> Russell specifically endorses global traits that, in part, produce consistent overt behaviors.<sup>53</sup> Other examples abound in the literature as well.<sup>54</sup> So it is no accident that situationist focus on overt behavior. And while virtue is undoubtedly not exhausted by dispositions to move in a certain way, defenders of virtue ethics clearly acknowledge its importance for virtue.

### *e. Emotional Responses*

Acting from virtue is also described as feeling a particular way while engaging in overt behavior. For example, “A good friend does not merely promote the good of her friend: she appreciates her friends, respects, and even loves her friend. Caring as a virtue involves

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<sup>50</sup> E.g., Nussbaum (1999), Hursthouse (1999), Annas (2011).

<sup>51</sup> Nussbaum (1999:170). This, of course, doesn’t exhaust Nussbaum’s account, which also includes motives, emotion, reasoning, and passion.

<sup>52</sup> Adams (2006:137).

<sup>53</sup> Russell (2009:326).

<sup>54</sup> See also Annas (2011:9), Hursthouse (1999:74-75), and Snow (2010:29).

receptivity, perhaps love in some sense.”<sup>55</sup> Acting to help a friend in need, even if for no other reason than that they are in need, may not be correctly described as acting from virtue if it is done begrudgingly or with indifference. Similarly, if someone is generous, it not just that they do the generous things, but that they have generous feelings as well.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, valuing the emotional aspect of virtue is crucial to understanding virtue more generally. Adams notes that, “If enduring personal qualities are morally important and valuable only for the value of actions to which they contribute, then a theory of virtues and vices can hardly be more than a pendant to the ethics of action.”<sup>57</sup> The emotional side to virtue is importantly connected to right action. Performing the same overt behavior as the virtuous agent, even when performing those actions for the same reasons as the virtuous agent, is insufficient for acting virtuously.<sup>58</sup>

To sum up, I’ve identified five candidates for the trait-relevant behavior that are associated with virtue: perception, construal, deliberation, overt behavior, and emotional responses. Despite much of the character debate focusing on inconsistency of overt behavior, the situationist argument should be understood as targeting a wide variety of behavioral types. This is important if since virtue ethical accounts committed to global traits can vary with respect to which behaviors are most connected to the virtue.

### **VIII. General Empirical Commitments of Virtue Ethics**

While the preceding section identified some possible empirical commitments on the part of virtue ethics, in the form of what could count as trait-relevant behavior, there are broader commitments many virtue ethical theories have in common that are important for the character

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<sup>55</sup> Swanton (2001:75).

<sup>56</sup> Annas (2011:9).

<sup>57</sup> Adams (2006:136).

<sup>58</sup> Hursthouse (1999: 123-6, 136).

debate. These general commitments underscore why virtue ethics is particularly subject powerful empirical criticism in the first place.

***a. Psychological realism***

One of the supposed advantages of the virtue ethical approach is that it provides a familiar psychological picture of human beings. Whatever the other merits of other approaches may be, the thought process of the diehard utilitarian or deontologist can seem rather alien to us. Someone that is moved by, for example, the demands of compassion rather than utility maximization or adherence to abstract principles is more understandable to the average person.<sup>59</sup> This point is underscored by proponents of virtue ethics being committed to *psychological realism*. Psychological realism is the view that moral theorizing be restricted to understandings of what human beings can realistically be expected to do or aspire to do.<sup>60 61</sup> Some theories of virtue are further restricted to psychological processes that can be *reasonably* expected of people, contrasted with merely possible. Certainly, some understand virtue ethics as primarily evaluative talk, able to fulfill its role independently of the types of psychological structures that most people have, but this proverbial exception that proves the rule. Character and virtue are often described as deep and enduring features *of* the agent.<sup>62</sup> More recent approaches to virtue, built in part on the foundation of recent psychological research, share this commitment as well.<sup>63</sup> A failure of psychological realism in a virtue ethical theory, while not something on the level of a contradiction, breaks with a long-held view about character and virtue. Recall from chapter 1 the

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<sup>59</sup> E.g., Prinz (2009) and Flanagan (1991:182).

<sup>60</sup> Flanagan (1991).

<sup>61</sup> E.g., Besser-Jones (2014).

<sup>62</sup> Annas (2011), Hursthouse (1999), and Swanton (2001; 2003).

<sup>63</sup> For example, see Russell (2009), Snow (2010), and though not a proponent of virtue ethics, Miller's (2013;2014) innovative view of character is committed to a psychological realistic picture of character.

importance of the development of virtue, and Aristotle's understanding of virtuous character as a natural state of flourishing for human beings.

### ***b. Causal Power***

Given the importance of acting *from* virtue in order to perform right action, character traits, or at the very least the virtues, are thought to have some level of causal power. Causal power, that is, in determining at least the agent's trait-relevant behavior. If character traits or virtues were causally inert, it is difficult to see what relevance possession of certain traits or virtues would have for an agent's behavior. Again, a live option is that what the virtuous agent does and how they do it could be a purely evaluative standard for action which we can compare ourselves to. Hursthouse specifically rejects this kind of picture of virtue, as she maintains virtue has a kind of "anti-codifiability", specifically unsuitable as a purely evaluative standard of action.<sup>64</sup> An examination of many prominent virtue ethical theories reveals at least some causal relevance for traits.<sup>65</sup> But situationists clearly expect more than a minimal causal role for traits. Doris claims that the expectation is that possession of a particular trait should result in trait-relevant behavior in trait-relevant situations at a regularity that is "markedly above chance."<sup>66</sup> Although casualty isn't specifically cited, it is safe to assume that the actual possession of the trait should be somewhere in the causal chain that leads to an agent's action.<sup>67</sup>

## **IX. Concluding Thoughts**

In this chapter, I presented the general situationist argument, its targets, clarified misrepresentations on both sides of the character debate, and identified empirical commitments of various virtue ethical theories. The commitments mentioned here are not meant to be

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<sup>64</sup> Hursthouse (1999:57).

<sup>65</sup> E.g., see Snow (2010:31, 89), Adams (2006:137), Hursthouse (1999), Annas (2005:642; 2011:9), Russell (2009:326), Swanton (2003:19), and McDowell (1979).

<sup>66</sup> Doris (2002: 19).

<sup>67</sup> Alfano (2013:30) describes the explanatory power of traits to be linked up with their causal efficacy.

exhaustive of all potential empirical commitments, though together they do constitute where much of the empirical analysis occurs in the character debate. What is hopefully clear at this point is that there are, in fact, empirical commitments of virtue ethical theories, both in a general sense and regarding what counts as trait-relevant behavior, which opens such theories up to the empirical criticism. While some defenders of virtue embrace an empirically informed approach,<sup>68</sup> empirical commitments are not always stated clearly. Of course, on its own, empirical commitments do not secure any kind of victory for the situationist, as it must be shown (1) that inconsistency with respect to trait-relevant behavior does occur and (2) that such inconsistency is due to factors that should trouble the virtue ethicist. Now that these empirical commitments are in view, in the next chapter I consider a representative sample of data available to the situationist and argue that there is sufficient empirical evidence to support the general situationist argument against virtue ethics.

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<sup>68</sup> E.g, Snow (2010), Russell (2009), and Besser-Jones (2014).

## CHAPTER 3: THE DATA

### I. Introduction

Situationists cite numerous experimental results in support of their general argument against virtue ethics. Recall premise (2) of the general situationist argument which states, “Systematic observation reveals pervasive behavioral inconsistency.” The behaviors of interest are the trait-relevant behaviors described in the virtue ethics literature. What counts as trait-relevant behavior varies across different accounts of virtue ethics. As a result, the general situationist argument is at its strongest when “behavior” can be read in a variety of ways. Chapter 2 identified five often cited aspects of trait-relevant behavior for virtue ethics: perception, construal, deliberation, emotional response, and overt behavior. In this chapter, I survey a representative sample of empirical studies in support of premise (2) that demonstrate inconsistency across a range of potential trait-relevant behaviors. While overviews of experimental data cited by situationists are found throughout the character debate,<sup>1</sup> my approach of categorizing the results according to which behaviors are shown to be inconsistent is novel and will help clarify why certain rebuttals to the situationist argument fail.

The organization of the chapter is as follows. In Section II I identify exactly what kind of inconsistency is of interest, and the specific criteria I use to identify that inconsistency. Section III provides specific examples of studies that show inconsistency across a range of potential trait-relevant behaviors. I consider some general objections to the studies used in Section IV, and close in Section V with a general overview of the main results of this chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Doris (2002), Alfano (2013), Snow (2010), Miller (2013; 2014), and Besser-Jones (2014).

## II. Getting Consistent on Inconsistency

The character debate focuses on the supposed inconsistency of trait-relevant behavior. Trait-appropriate behavior is consistent if trait-relevant behavior reliably manifests across a wide variety of trait-relevant situations. A failure of consistency is a failure of the trait-relevant behavior to manifest in those situations where it is called for, to a significant enough degree. For example, if Sara has the global trait of honesty, on separate occasions when Sara is in honesty-relevant situations, we should expect Sara to manifest honesty-relevant behavior. More needs to be said, however, about what kinds of failures of consistency matter, as not just any lapses of behavior will do. If honest Sara is subsequently seen to take up theft, but we learn she is stealing in order to feed starving orphans, whatever this might say about her character, it doesn't indicate she is being inconsistently honest by the situationist.

The kind of behavioral inconsistency the situationist is interested in is one where across situations with features that call for the trait-relevant behavior, that differ only with respect to *trait-irrelevant* situational features, the trait-relevant behavior does not manifest. Keeping in mind, as was discussed in chapter 2, that the frequency of trait-relevant behavior manifesting, by situationist standards, is only "markedly above chance" – nothing like an expectation of 100% manifestation. Of course, more needs to be said about what exactly counts as a *trait-irrelevant* situational feature.

Call a situational feature *trait-irrelevant* if it is both *minor* and *morally irrelevant* with respect to whatever the trait-relevant behavior happens to be. For example, while one's starving child is a morally relevant factor regarding whether or not one should steal, having sunglasses on seems obviously morally irrelevant to stealing. With respect to a factor being minor, consider a case where someone fails to act compassionately when it is clearly called for, but then you come

to learn that their spouse has recently passed away. That someone close has passed away doesn't exactly seem like a reason *not* to act compassionately, but I think it's understandable. To put it another way, if the situationist argument was based on observations of people failing to act consistently when going through periods of grief or depression, the evidence wouldn't be very compelling.<sup>2</sup> Another way of thinking about this point is that the kind of inconsistency situationists stress is shifts in trait-relevant behavior due to factors that are not defensible as a reason for action (*morally irrelevant*), nor even somewhat understandable as the cause of behavioral shift (*minor*).

Admittedly, I am relying a bit on intuition and personal judgment with respect to what counts as trait-irrelevant factors, which isn't completely satisfying. The dissatisfaction, however, I think can be mitigated by the fact that people on both sides of the character debate cite the same studies, so there's at least some agreement on, *prima facie*, which situational factors are of interest. Additionally, for the studies that are cited, the factors which are cited as having a significant impact on trait-relevant behavior seem hardly controversial as qualifying as minor, morally irrelevant factors. Miller settles on calling the factors I mean to highlight as "surprising" factors that significantly impact our behavior or deliberative processes.<sup>3</sup> As mentioned earlier, when certain situational factors are found to have a significant impact trait-relevant behavior, one can consider if such a factor would be acceptable to cite as the reason for that behavior. That most people are more courteous after being given a freshly baked cookie might not give us pause. But if courteousness is somehow tied to the color of the drapes, that seems a bit strange. Again, given the general acceptance of the pool of studies to be concerned about within the

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<sup>2</sup> Hursthouse (1999:78) lists some common examples of factors that, while not justification for lapses in behavior, are at least understandable. These include grief, physical inability, and involuntary intoxication.

<sup>3</sup> Miller (forthcoming).



character debate, I believe my somewhat loose understanding of trait-irrelevant factors is up to the task of identifying which studies are of interest to the character debate.

### **III. Experimental Evidence**

With a somewhat clearer picture of how to identify those studies relevant to the character debate, I now shift focus to demonstrating how inconsistency can be found in the various types of trait-relevant behavior. I do want to flag that I do not claim to hold a privileged interpretation of the studies discussed here. Different interpretations are certainly available, and new experimental work may affirm or undermine any of the studies I highlight. Experimental results can, and certainly should be, questioned. That being said, I take the studies here at face value, and leave criticism of experimental design and data analysis with respect to best practices in psychology to the experts. The general situationist argument clearly depends on empirical data, and if the data can be shown to be illegitimate, then of course the situationist argument would be undermined. But lacking specific arguments to the contrary, I think it's fair to trust the results of empirical research that has been vetted by a particular discipline's standard practices until there is sufficient evidence to think otherwise.

Following the identification of potential trait-relevant behavior from chapter 2, I divide the discussion of the experimental data based on which particular trait-relevant behavior has been shown to have troubling inconsistency. The categories of trait-relevant behavior, of course, aren't meant to cut psychology and behavior at its joints. Additionally, my division of trait-relevant behaviors is also not intended to represent a functional order of data input, deliberation, and overt behavioral output. That is, construing a particular situation does not always need to occur prior to deliberation. Some form of learning can occur during deliberation and perhaps awareness of additional factors that had previously gone unnoticed, which in turn might reorient

deliberation. The exact order of events does not actually matter for my purposes. It's important to keep in mind that, while most of the studies report significant changes in overt behavior, I think reasonable inferences can be made with respect to which trait-relevant behavior was impacted by the trait-relevant factor. Interpretation is aided by the background information presented along with the experimental results.

**a. *Perception***

Perception is the awareness (both conscious and unconscious) of situational features facing the individual. This includes brute sensory awareness, but can further include things like empathic awareness of the emotional state of others.

Much of the relevant experimental evidence for perception involves the study of attention. Studies have shown that positive or negative mood can have a significant effect on how much we attend to the world around us. Sedikides (1992) indicates that good mood broadens our attention, while bad moods narrow it. This has been interpreted as explaining some studies regarding helping behavior, such as pleasing smells (e.g., fresh bread or coffee) having a significant effect on helping behavior. In Baron (1997) subjects were more likely to alert and help someone who had various items falling out of a bag they were carrying when around pleasing smells. Reducing the level of neutral stimuli increased helpfulness on a general level (Korte et al. 1975:1000-1). That mood can significantly impact any behavior may not be much of a surprise. It's best not to ask someone for a favor after they've had a bad night at the poker table. What is important though is how minor the factors are that impact our mood enough to make difference. Smells in the air or noise levels are sufficient to significantly change levels of helpfulness. Smells (excepting certain extremes) also seem morally irrelevant to helpfulness.

One of the most often cited experiments in the character debate is the Darley and Batson (1973) ‘Good Samaritan’ study. The design of the experiment consisted in seminary students tasked with delivering a sermon on the famous ‘Good Samaritan’ parable, which highlights the importance of helping strangers in need. After being assigned to give the lecture in a location far across Princeton’s campus, the students were either told they had plenty of time to get there, or were running late already. A confederate was placed on the path toward the lecture location that appeared in to be great distress. The results of the experiment are summarized in the table below.

**Table 1: Good Samaritan Study Results**

	Low Degree of Hurry	Medium Degree of Hurry	High Degree of Hurry
Percentage of subjects rendering aid	63%	45%	10%

There are multiple explanations for these results, some of which claim the anxiety of being late for the lecture narrowed some students’ attention such that they didn’t notice the person in need. This is only one explanation of course, and an alternate interpretation will be discussed in later sections. Assuming it’s a case of narrowed attention where the subjects didn’t notice the confederate, that something as simple as running later might impact our ability to perceiving someone in distress can be alarming.

***b. Construal***

I turn now to studies relevant for construal. Recall that construal involves the agent’s interpretation and understanding of a particular situation. For these studies, it is not a matter of the expansion or narrowing of attention such that certain features are either missed or become more salient. Many defenders of virtue ethics discuss experimental subjects’ construal as a way

of explaining away potentially problematic results.<sup>4</sup> How effective such responses are is reserved for chapter 4.

Automaticity research purports to show that much of our decision making, including moral decision making, is the result of several processes we are unaware of and that function below the level of conscious awareness. One example of the effect of automatic processing is unconscious goal activation. As Snow describes it, “when an individual encounters the relevant situational features, the representation of the associated goal is directly but nonconsciously activated.”<sup>5</sup> Such representations, for example, can significantly impact construing other people as neutral bystanders or potential rivals.<sup>6</sup>

Many studies associated with automaticity involve priming subjects with words or images, and then checking if that priming has a detectable overt behavioral impact. Consider one of the most famous (and controversial) examples. I describe it here only to clarify the research program. Exposing subjects to multiple words normally associated with the elderly (e.g., retirement, Florida) in something like a word search task seemed to cause subjects to walk more slowly when leaving the lab than those exposed to neutral words.<sup>7</sup> This study in particular has been disputed,<sup>8</sup> though there have been some published replications.<sup>9</sup> Whatever the ultimate fate of this study is, walking speed doesn’t obviously seem relevant for character discussions. There are, however, replicated priming studies which appear to impact morally relevant construal behaviors.

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., Kamtekar (2004), Snow (2010), Russell (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Snow (2010:43).

<sup>6</sup> The automaticity research project has come under controversy, with failures to replicate certain popular studies. Despite this, there are several prominent studies that have been replicated by multiple labs to safely include them into the discussion.

<sup>7</sup> Bargh et al. (1996).

<sup>8</sup> Doyen et al. (2012).

<sup>9</sup> Hull et al. (2002) and Cesario et al. (2006).

Racial stereotype priming has been linked to increased aggression.<sup>10</sup> A meta-analysis of multiple priming effects on impression formation supports a range of studies stretching back to the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> As the name implies, impression formation is linked to our initial judgments of people and can significantly impact how we treat them in social situations. For example, subjects primed by either words indicating a power differential or activation of career goals, can lead to increased dismissiveness or disrespect.<sup>12</sup> Priming done with movies with revenge themes increased subjects' punishment of a competitor in a game.<sup>13</sup> Evidence from automaticity research clearly shows how construal can be significantly impacted due to minor and, I submit, morally irrelevant changes in situation.

One general way of understanding the impact of many of the studies which appear to have their impact on construal is that the situational factors limit the perceived options for the subjects before they even begin to deliberate. The general idea is that particular situational factors cause the subject to not see particular options as an "option for me".<sup>14</sup> Options that might seem obvious to a third party observer may not even occur as live options for someone in the "heat of the moment". Whatever the impact of disruptions of construal may be, they are subject to trait-irrelevant factors.

### *c. Deliberation*

The deliberative process includes choosing course of action, given the particular options that appear to be open to the agent. The influence of minor, morally irrelevant situational factors should demonstrate inconsistency in the process of the subject making a choice among different options (or perhaps even selecting the only choice available). By way of illustration, consider the

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<sup>10</sup> Wheeler and Petty (2001) and Wheeler and DeMarree (2009).

<sup>11</sup> DeCoster and Claypool (2004).

<sup>12</sup> Chartrand and Bargh (1996).

<sup>13</sup> Green and Stonner (1973).

<sup>14</sup> Murray (2014:717-718).

following toy example. Suppose you're in a room with a few other people, and suddenly you hear a loud crash and a scream of pain from the next room. Among the possible courses of action, you think you can get up to check out the disturbance, sit quietly and do nothing, or encourage someone else to check it out. Choosing among these three options is how I am defining the deliberative process. All of the options must be perceived, for the subject, as an "option for me" (as discussed in the previous section). There might have been options you could take in the room when you hear the crash but that never reached the level of deliberation. For example, there may have been a telephone or intercom in the room that, for whatever reason, went unnoticed. That you fail to use (or even consider) the telephone is not a failure of deliberation.

The above example resembles studies conducted on the effects of crowds of varying size on individuals' willingness to render aid. In one study, subjects were put into a situation very much like that described above, where a loud crash was heard in a neighboring room. Subjects who were alone in the original room when they heard the crash were much more likely to get up and investigate than those who were in the room with other people. The same kinds of effects have been readily documented in large crowds outside of the laboratory as well, sometimes dubbed the "group effect".<sup>15</sup> There are multiple theories as to why this occurs, from the idea that large crowds diffuse responsibility, or even an attempt to avoid embarrassment of being the only person to offer assistance when none might be needed.<sup>16</sup> Whatever the primary motivator may actually be, I characterize such effects as occurring during the deliberative state, since it hardly seems plausible that, barring exceptional circumstances, even the possibility of rendering assistance (or even just investigating someone's cry for help) didn't occur to the agent. Certainly

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<sup>15</sup> For a review of various group effect studies, see Miller (2014:142-146).

<sup>16</sup> For an extensive review of the group effect literature, see Miller (2013: 143-145).

there are likely to be cases where crowds are so large that people fail to notice someone in need, as described by Ross and Nisbett (1991:43). This, however, does not explain all of the different iterations of group effect studies, and thus at least some group effect studies demonstrate inconsistency in deliberation.<sup>17</sup>

A less dramatic case involves light levels and cheating behavior.<sup>18</sup> Researchers found that slightly lower light levels in a room (not enough to significantly interfere with vision) increased cheating behavior. Subjects completed a series of mathematics puzzles and were allowed to score their own work. Each correct answer earned the subject a cash reward. Inaccurate scoring in favor of earning more money was significantly higher in the room with lower light levels. Cheating was similarly increased for subjects wearing sunglasses. In contrast to cheating behavior, charitable giving and volunteering one's time also have a surprising connection to subtle situational factors. Another study found subjects in cleanly scented rooms gave significantly more money to charity than those in neutral smelling rooms.<sup>19</sup> As with the previously discussed studies, it's hard to imagine that subjects in these studies didn't realize that not cheating or not giving to charity was an "option for them". Another result from the automaticity research is that the environment one casts their vote significantly impact the types of social policies one supports. Voting in a school, as opposed to a neutral location like a post office or town hall building, increases the likelihood that people support a sales tax increase for education funding.<sup>20</sup> Given the presence of a ballot, the available choices are quite explicit, and not something that could easily be missed via perception or construal.

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<sup>17</sup> In particular see Latané and Darley (1970), Latané et al. (1981), and Karakashian et al. (2006) for discussion of subjects noticing the person in need, and recognized the possibility that they could render assistance, but chose not to.

<sup>18</sup> Zhong et al. (2010).

<sup>19</sup> Liljenquist et al. (2010).

<sup>20</sup> Originally published in Bargh et al (1996), replicated by Dijksterhuis & Bargh (2001), Wheeler & Petty (2001) and Wheeler & DeMarree (2009).

Consider a further variation on the Good Samaritan study, discussed in some detail in Snow (2010: 103-107). Besides the previous experimental conditions of being told whether or not they needed to hurry to the location, participants were also informed as to how important their lecture was. The results are summarized below.

**Table 2: Good Samaritan Study Variation Results**

	Low Importance & No Hurry	Low Importance & Hurry	High Importance & No Hurry	High Importance & Hurry
Percentage of subjects rendering aid	80%	70%	50%	10%

These results indicate further considerations on the part of the participants. When they thought there wasn't a great many people depending on them, more of them stopped to help the confederate, even when they were running late. One way to interpret this is that it was not simply a matter of participants being in the rush and not noticing the confederate, but rather that some weighing, either conscious or unconscious, of responsibilities took place. If they were running late and thought their lecture was important, they passed by the confederate. Otherwise, helping someone clearly in need trumped anything about a lecture. One thought is that this mitigates the worry about the Good Samaritan case since all that really occurred was a weighing of responsibilities, rather than any peculiar situational influence.<sup>21</sup>

Feelings of guilt and embarrassment also result in changes to deliberation. Subjects induced to feel guilt were more likely to help strangers with things like alerting them to leaving their belongings somewhere, or to help pick up dropped materials.<sup>22</sup> Numerous studies on guilt and embarrassment seem to indicate that such feelings motivate helpfulness and courtesy because the subject wants to make up for a wrong they perceive themselves to have done (in the

<sup>21</sup> Batson et al. (1978:100).

<sup>22</sup> Regan et al. (1972) and Konečni (1972).



case of guilt) or to repair a damaged image, raise self-esteem, or just alleviate the bad feelings (in the case of embarrassment).<sup>23</sup> In a similar vein, subjects in a generally positive mood are more likely to be helpful in an attempt to maintain that particular mood.<sup>24</sup>

The studies in the preceding paragraph may seem like an odd inclusion into the mix, as it may not be all that surprising feelings of guilt or embarrassment lead to people trying to make-up for perceived wrongdoing or repairing their self-image. One reason to consider studies such as these is the relative ease in which guilt and embarrassment can be induced in people through very minor, morally irrelevant situational changes. For example, simply asking people for a small favor soon after their leave a bathroom was sufficient induce embarrassment help such that they were more helpful.<sup>25</sup> Producing enough guilt in someone is as easy as simply telling them they have done something to cause an expensive camera to malfunction, or even priming them with guilt-related adjectives.<sup>26</sup>

#### ***d. Overt Behavior***

Minor, morally irrelevant situational influence on overt behavior occurs when a subject has decided on some course of action during the deliberative stage, but somehow fails to follow-through with that decision. The failure here, of course, should come from the subject themselves, and not some external force like being physically restrained from acting. Such a situation is sometimes described in discussions of virtue and character as *akratic* behavior or weakness of will. However such interference ends up being described, it is helpful to note exactly which studies point to overt behavioral inconsistency.

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<sup>23</sup> For an extensive review of guilt and embarrassment studies, see Miller 2013 (33-63).

<sup>24</sup> Miller (2013:72).

<sup>25</sup> Miller (2013:57ff).

<sup>26</sup> Regan et al. (1972) and Zhong and Liljenquist (2006). As those like Miller (2013: 34n19) have pointed out, these inducements of guilt are rather minor, and should not be confused with feeling of chronic guilt suffered by some, which is not thought to enhance helping behavior (see Quiles and Bybee: 1997). Chronic guilt is not a condition the aforementioned studies have attempted to induce in subjects.

Stanley Milgram's obedience study is one of the most cited studies in debates about character and virtue.<sup>27</sup> The published conclusions reveal that everyday people can be driven to administer seemingly dangerous electric shocks to an innocent person under the command of a stern scientist. Milgram observed that "Subjects have learned from childhood that it is a fundamental breach of moral conduct to hurt another person against his will. Yet, 26 subjects abandon this tenet in following the instructions of an authority who has no special powers to enforce his commands."<sup>28</sup> The 26 referenced here (2/3 of the total number of participants) are those who continued to shock the victim even after the victim protested and became unresponsive.

While some test subjects were described as tense, nervous, and some even protesting, they continued to obey. These regular people seemingly abandoned, ignored, or were simply unaffected by traits of common decency because of the circumstances of the situation. Given the description of the study, it seems difficult to claim that there were not obvious features to the situation available to give participants sufficient reasons or motivations to act otherwise than they did. Subjects heard clear protests or screams of the victim and the machine they were using to administer the shocks was clearly labeled with numerous warnings. Merely focusing on the most well-known experimental results, as is sometimes done in the character debate, misses what I think is the real importance of the Milgram experiment for the character debate. While the urgings of the scientist might seem to be a minor situational factor, I think a case could be made for it not being a morally irrelevant factor. Orders from an authority figure, especially from a scientist in the context of an experiment, likely carry some legitimacy. Variations on the original experimental conditions, however, provide an interesting perspective. While the physical

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<sup>27</sup> Milgram (1963; 371 – 378).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

presences of the authority figure ordering the electric shocks resulted in high levels of obedience, putting the authority figure on the phone resulted in plummeting obedience rates.<sup>29</sup> Having the victim in the same room as the subject also lowered obedience levels, especially when subjects had to make physical contact with the victim to administer the shock. The numerous accounts of subjects protesting against continuing indicate a decision to stop participation, but they then failed to follow through with such a decision because of the experimental conditions.<sup>30</sup> The Good Samaritan study might be best understood in the same light with subjects wanting to help, even deciding to, bow to the demands of punctuality and continue on their way to give a lecture.<sup>31</sup> The same could also be said for the numerous group effect studies, where subjects felt a strong desire to help, decided they should do something, but were then overwhelmed by wanting to avoid something like embarrassment.<sup>32</sup>

As with the previous categories, different interpretations of these studies are possible, and this is especially true in the case of evaluating overt behavior. But since overt behavior is often downstream of perception, construal, and deliberation, overt behavior is plausibly the most impacted by minor, morally irrelevant situational factors, albeit sometimes indirectly.

In the preceding sections, I've identified a sampling of experimental data that demonstrates minor, morally irrelevant situational conditions having a significant impact on the given trait-relevant behavior. This impact is what supports the situationist claim of pervasive behavioral inconsistency. Recall, however, that the discussion in chapter 2 also cited emotional responses as trait-relevant behavior, and none of the studies I've mentioned have discussed inconsistency with respect to a subject's emotional response. The main reason is that there is

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<sup>29</sup> Milgram (1974:59-62).

<sup>30</sup> This interpretation is offered by Swanton (2003:31). Bok (1996) explains the results of the Milgram experiment being due to perceived conflicts of duty leading to indecision.

<sup>31</sup> Doris (2002) offers a possible interpretation along these lines.

<sup>32</sup> See Bandura (1996) for additional interpretations of studies like the Milgram experiment.

simply a lack of empirical study that specifically focuses on emotional responses in a way that's relevant to the character debate. Indeed, in the case of the Milgram experiment, despite continuing to administer "dangerous" electric shocks, emotional distress on the part of the subjects seemed to be appropriate to the circumstances. Measuring specifically emotional responses, while certainly not impossible, has its own set of empirical challenges. Despite the lack of experimental evidence, the situationist argument has not been specifically targeted against emotional responses, so I don't think the lack of data in this area need trouble the situationist. While in principle one might think they could build a virtue ethical theory around purely emotional responses in an attempt to avoid situationist criticism, the normative value of such a theory seems suspect. The issue of the normative adequacy of a moral theory is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

#### **IV. Objections to the Empirical Data**

Rather than offering alternative interpretations of the experimental data, another response to situationist arguments is to reject that the data undermines virtue ethics in the first place. This type of response is articulated in a few distinct ways. In this part of the discussion, I'll address the most promising arguments against the type of data cited by situationists.

##### ***a. Lack of Longitudinal Studies***

With only a few exceptions, data cited by situationists are based one-off studies, rather than longitudinal studies. A study is longitudinal when it involves repeated observations of the same variables over long periods of time, such as observing the same person over time. One of the main reasons such studies are rare in social psychology is the high cost and difficult logistics of maintaining long term observations of the same individual. Furthermore, the level of control experimenters have outside of a laboratory environment is considerably lower, making data

analysis much more difficult for “free range” test subjects. It should be noted, however, that the difficulty of longitudinal studies alone does not justify using results from one-off studies to support strong situationist conclusions. Fortunately for the situationist, there are independent reasons for thinking the results from one-off studies are more than up for the task to support general situationist argument.

To understand this objection to the experimental evidence, it is important to understand why it might seem that longitudinal studies are necessary to draw conclusions about people’s character. Recall two of the tenants of globalism identified by Doris, consistency and stability. Consistency requires that trait-relevant behavior reliably manifests across a wide variety of trait-relevant situations. Stability requires that trait-relevant behavior manifests over time in the same way in similar trait-relevant situations. If a particular study only includes behavioral observations of an individual in a single condition, it’s natural to ask what this could possibly say about someone’s behavior in a wide variety of situations over long periods of time. Some authors make just this sort of point in their rejection of much of the data referenced by situationists.<sup>33</sup>

One quick response to such a complaint is that, for at least *some* character traits, a single event observation is sufficient to undermine particular trait attributions. Someone that cheats on their spouse even just one time would justifiably be said to lack the trait of faithfulness. So-called “high-fidelity” traits do not require multiple observations to gather strong evidence against someone lacking such a trait.<sup>34</sup> Other claims by situationists cite the incredible wealth of experimental data supporting the claim that subtle situational factors strongly influence trait-relevant behavior reduces the need for any single study to be so large in scope.<sup>35</sup> However, such responses do not fully address the complaint about there being too few longitudinal studies. For

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<sup>33</sup> See Sreenivasn (2008:607) and Kupperman (1991: 162-163).

<sup>34</sup> Alfano (2013: 72-73).

<sup>35</sup> Doris (2002:38).

one, merely claiming that one study is enough to undermine certain high-fidelity virtues significantly narrows the scope of the situationist argument. Indeed, it almost seems like an argument *for* the rarity of high-fidelity traits, like virtues of faithfulness or chastity, something I expect most defenders of virtues ethics would not deny. If complaints about a lack of longitudinal studies can undermine just a few of the more prominent studies cited by situationists, like Milgram, defenders of virtue ethics will have made significant progress in reducing the threat of the empirical evidence.

The worry about a lack of longitudinal studies can be addressed in a more favorable way for the situationist. Recall that the complaint about the lack of longitudinal studies is that we supposedly cannot draw conclusions about someone's character from a one-off case.<sup>36</sup> A single observation of behavior in a single setting does not reveal what someone will do if they run into the same circumstances at some point later in time or find themselves in some variation of the circumstances. It is important to unpack what some of the implications of this complaint. At the very least, it's meant to imply that a single failure to act in a way consistent with trait-relevant behavior in trait-relevant situations is not sufficient evidence to claim that person does not possess a particular global character trait or maybe even virtue. This seems right, someone could possess the trait of generosity or charitableness without donating time or money to every single organization or individual that legitimately requests it. A similar response has been made towards the results of the Milgram experiment.<sup>37</sup> The failure to act with compassion in this one-off case is not sufficient evidence to claim that any one participant lacked compassion.

Set aside for the moment the thought that perhaps shocking someone to the point of them being non-responsive might be reason to think someone lacks compassion, even if they only do it

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<sup>36</sup> For the purposes of this response, I set aside any concerns regarding high-fidelity traits.

<sup>37</sup> Sreenevasin (2002; 2008).

once. I take it that advancing an objection against non-longitudinal studies might claim that something like a failure to act compassionately in a Milgram-style setting would not invalidate all the other times a person has acted compassionately. It seems appropriate to still attribute a trait of compassion to someone, even if they do have the occasional “off-day” or failure to act compassionately. A situationist might want to quibble further with this point, but I think a better response is to accept these claims without complaint and then show how it still fails to address the force of the situationist evidence.

The situationist argument against the widespread possession of global character traits is not some kind of inductive argument starting with various individuals failing to possess global character traits. As discussed earlier, situationists readily admit that direct evidence for or against a particular person’s possession of one kind of character trait or another would require long term, systematic observation of that individual.<sup>38</sup> Instead, with regard to interpreting experimental results to support their argument, situationists are best thought of as appealing to inference to the best explanation. Having an “off-day” for being compassionate could make sense when considering a single person. However, to claim that the results of so many of the studies cited by situationists are better explained by all these participants having their “compassion off-day”, rather than the experimental conditions, strains credulity. This is especially true in the case of the Milgram experiment, given the numerous replications of the study, which have resulted in very similar findings.<sup>39</sup> Situationist claims about a lack of global character traits are not meant to apply to any single person from a given study, but are instead meant to explain so many of the experimental findings in the literature.

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<sup>38</sup> Doris (2002:38).

<sup>39</sup> Blass (1999).

An analogy may be helpful in clarifying this point. Assume a pharmaceutical trial showed overall that the subjects given the experimental drug had a significantly larger improvement in health than the control group. This doesn't show that any individual subject in the experimental condition had their health improved by the drug. But it is evidence that, overall, health is improved by the experimental drug. So while non-longitudinal studies do not allow one to draw conclusions about individuals, the results can support observations about population norms. And this is just what the situationist needs to support something like (2) in the general situationist argument.

***b. Studies fail to test morally relevant behavior***

Situationists appear to have a great body of experimental evidence to draw from in support of their arguments. However, some accuse situationists of citing studies that fail to test morally relevant behavior.<sup>40</sup> The complaint here is that far too many of the studies test behavior in situations having to do with courtesy, politeness, or low-stakes situations. If this argument goes through, of course, it would not remove all of the empirical support for the situationist argument. Studies such as the Milgram experiment clearly test morally relevant behavior. But if the defender of virtue ethics can drastically reduce the scope of the experimental evidence brought against their view, a piecemeal response to individual studies becomes a promising strategy. This is especially true in my case where empirical evidence is spread across categories of trait-relevant behavior.

One famous study targeted by this reply, and that has also seen a lot of mileage in the character debate, is one where the presence or absence of a dime in the coin return in a phone booth was found to be the best predictor of someone stopping to help pick up some dropped

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<sup>40</sup> Sabini and Silver (2005: 540).



papers.<sup>41</sup> This is clearly a far cry from testing someone's willingness to administer electric. So the objection goes, a failure to act in these minimally demanding situations says little about someone's character, let alone virtue. While such results may be interesting to social psychology, the results should have little bearing on discussions virtue ethics.

Reasonable people can disagree about the relevance of these studies. While I may not be a moral monster for not stopping to pick up some dropped papers, it doesn't seem mistaken to think that we often judge people on how they handle themselves in such situations. But rather than push for the importance of courtesy, there is a more promising response that can be made by the situationist. Accepting the argument that studies which measure low-stakes behavior have little bearing on certain character evaluations doesn't actually help a defender of virtue ethics all that much. Instead, it puts the defender of virtue ethics in an awkward position of claiming such studies measure trait-irrelevant behavior. This seems to force defenders of virtue ethics to be committed to the following: while situations involving matters of significant moral weight are often guided by character, small acts of courtesy and kindness are largely at the mercy of situational influences. The implication is that most of our everyday interactions with others are subject the inconsistency situationists argue for, since most people don't find themselves in situations of heavy moral importance that often. While such a view might be compatible with globalist versions of virtue ethics, it seems unlikely a defender of virtue ethics would wish to concede so much of our everyday life to situationist interpretation. Indeed, this seems to concede the point that much of our everyday behavior *isn't* ordered by global traits, which is hardly a defense against the general situationist argument.

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<sup>41</sup> Isen and Levin (1974).

## V. Closing Thoughts

This chapter has presented a representative sample of empirical studies which demonstrate minor, morally irrelevant situational factors having a significant impact on a range of trait-relevant behaviors. Some responses to situationist arguments have attempted to focus on alternatives to overt behavior as the trait-relevant behavior most important to virtue ethics.<sup>42</sup>

With the exception of emotional responses, the inconsistency applies to the full range of potential trait-relevant behaviors. So whatever it is a defender of virtue ethics claims the primary trait-relevant behavior to be, there is likely a serious empirical threat to be considered. In essence, the behavioral inconsistency pointed out by situationists can't be swept under the rug.

There are, of course, other ways for defenders of virtue ethics to respond to the empirical data. One of the more recent responses is to claim that data cited by situationist doesn't actually demonstrate inconsistency, once situations are categorized by psychological features salient to the agent, rather than the objective features observable from a 3<sup>rd</sup> person perspective. This response will be the focus of the next chapter.

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<sup>42</sup> E.g., Murray (2014).

## CHAPTER 4: RESPONSES TO SITUATIONISM

### I. Introduction

As should be clear at this point, virtue ethics refers to a broad category of ethical theories, with much more complex theoretical commitments than merely the development of a virtuous character. Additionally, situationist arguments against virtue ethics target a wide variety of theoretical claims. Despite this, it's fair to say that the situationists' main line of criticism is primarily fueled by empirical observations of behavioral inconsistency. Following the familiar structure of philosophical debate, much turns on what is meant by key terms. Within the character debate, disagreement abounds over what exactly is meant by *consistency*. In this chapter, I argue that many who answer situationist charges of inconsistency by redefining consistency do so to the detriment of their own theory.<sup>1</sup> Definitions of consistency on offer, exemplified by the work of Snow, Russell, and Miller, argue for a revisionary kind of consistency as sufficient for character and virtue. There are serious problems with these accounts of consistency, however, since in each case there is a failure of *normative* or *empirical adequacy* for the resulting theory. While such failures by no means falsify the theory, it should raise doubt as to their suitability for addressing situationist arguments.

In section II, I provide my criteria for assessing normative and empirical adequacy. Section III presents a more detailed and general account of consistency that is neutral with respect to the character debate. This general account provides a framework by which to

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<sup>1</sup>Another response to the charges of inconsistency is to assert that the virtue ethics tradition is *not* committed to consistent traits (e.g., Hurka 2006). A theory of virtue that denies any commitment to consistency is obviously not troubled by situationist worries of inconsistency. But given the common commitments of virtue ethics discussed in chapter 2, such a view is in a minority. My arguments in this chapter are only directed at defenders of virtue ethics who take some form of consistency as crucial to their theory.

better evaluate the work of Snow, Russell, and Miller on consistency. Section IV identifies the general structure of the accounts by Snow, Russell and Miller. In section V, I describe the empirical model of traits endorsed by Snow and Russell, and then show in section VI why that model fails to be normatively adequate. Section VII describes Miller's mixed-trait account, while section VIII argues why Miller's account fails standards of empirical adequacy. I conclude in section IX by summarizing my findings and reasons that the situationist challenge has yet to be answered. With the situationist challenge unanswered, new directions for virtue ethics are needed.

## **II. Normative and Empirical Adequacy**

Throughout this chapter, I will argue that recent replies to situationist charges of inconsistency fail standards of *normative* or *empirical adequacy*. In this section, I outline my criteria for evaluating normative and empirical adequacy.

### ***a. Normative Adequacy***

A full accounting of a normative adequacy would require its own independent investigation, so it is not my intention to provide a complete picture here. Instead, I identify only a necessary condition for a moral theory to be normatively adequate. Failure to meet this modest condition is sufficient to support my charge of certain accounts of consistency failing to be normatively adequate for virtue ethics.

Normative theories describe what *ought* to be the case or what we *ought* to strive for. This can include how we *ought* to act or what we *ought* to value. As discussed in chapter 1, virtue ethics is concerned with traits of character or virtues that we ought to develop in order to secure right action and personal flourishing as human beings. Recall that, for Aristotle, the normative force of the particular virtues he identifies is derived from a supposed natural

teleology of human beings as rational beings. Virtue ethics is, of course, not tied to Aristotle's original conception, and some contemporary virtue ethicists derive normative force from other potential sources, such as physiological health. Besser-Jones' account, for instance, uses a particular conception of psychological well-being for identifying virtues, while Snow focus on social intelligence. But overall, as I've discussed, common threads are found throughout many virtue ethical accounts which focus on facilitating right action and personal flourishing.

For a component of a theory to be normatively adequate it should at least support the normative ends of the theory itself.<sup>2</sup> For example, consider a utilitarian moral theory based around maximizing human happiness. Suppose this utilitarian theory included a specific algorithm for determining whether or not a particular action should be performed. If it turned out that this algorithm frequently recommended actions that miserably failed at maximizing human happiness, such an algorithm would fail to be a normatively adequate component of the utilitarian theory. I will argue that revisionary accounts of consistency offered by Snow and Russell fail to be normatively adequate for virtue ethics in a similar way. Snow and Russell's account of consistency, with respect to virtue ethics, can too easily fail facilitate right action, and may actively count against personal flourishing.

### ***b. Empirical Adequacy***

Empirical adequacy has a long history in the philosophy of science. Even when empirically informed, moral theories are held to different standards than scientific theories. Some accounts of consistency relevant for virtue ethics, however, are constructed in order to accommodate empirical observations. As a result, at least some standards of scientific theories, seem appropriate. Importantly, I am only interested in rather minimal standards of empirical adequacy. For the discussion of consistency, I am interested in what was first articulated by van

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<sup>2</sup> Sumner (1996).

Fraassen, that an empirically adequate theory “saves the phenomena.”<sup>3</sup> As I go on to argue in Section VII, the account of consistency offered by Miller, coupled with his understanding of a widely instantiated global character traits, fails to accommodate the phenomena that people can and do act *inconsistently*, or “out of character”. While Miller is not arguing for an account of virtue ethics, he does resist situationist claims regarding pervasive behavioral inconsistency. But in making even behavioral inconsistency effectively impossible, Miller’s response to situationists fails to be empirically adequate.

### III. A Positive Account of Consistency

Much of this chapter is occupied with showing how various defenders of virtue ethics have failed in one way or another to present an adequate definition of consistency. In this section, I present a very general definition of consistency that empirically minded theories of virtue ethics should be committed to. Additionally, in order to be consistent with the literature, I refer to individual traits being consistent, rather than persons being consistent. In this chapter, as with the previous chapters, the concept of trait-relevant behavior should be read as exceptionally broad, standing in for one or more of the trait-relevant behaviors discussed in Chapter 2. The potential trait-relevant behaviors are *perception, construal, deliberation, overt behavior, and emotional responses*. Consider the following definition:<sup>4</sup>

**Consistency:** A trait is consistent if *appropriate* trait-relevant behavior manifests with regularity significantly above chance for each *Response Individuating Feature* for multiple situations that differ only with respect to *Criterion Features*.

*Criterion Features* determine which character trait is under consideration. Additionally, if the *Criterion Feature* were not present, there would insufficient information for character

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<sup>3</sup> van Fraassen (1980:12).

<sup>4</sup> For additional discussion of this definition of consistency and others, see Webber (2006), Sreenivasan (2002; 2008) and Alfano (2013).

evaluation. For example, determining if an agent has compassion would require compassion-relevant behaviors across multiple situations where there is an appropriate opportunity for compassion-relevant behavior. *Criterion Features* should also be unified in some way such that, as a set, they are all related to the same trait under consideration. This is not to say that the same *Criterion Features* could not be used for multiple character evaluations. Whatever might be providing the opportunity for courage-relevant behavior may also be providing an opportunity for honesty-relevant behavior (e.g., testifying against a mob boss in a criminal trial is indicative of both honesty and courage). *Criterion Features* should not be a collection of disparate conditions for which consistent responses would be uninformative for potential trait attribution.

*Appropriate* trait-relevant behavior is behavior in-line with the trait under consideration determined by the *Criterion Features*. For example, if the *Criterion Features* are unified with respect to opportunities for courageous behavior, the *appropriate* trait-relevant behavior is behavior considered courageous. So for a consistent trait of courage, the courage-relevant behavior should manifest with regularity significantly above chance for each *Response Individuating Feature* for each *Criterion Feature*.

*Response Individuating Features* are the factors that individuate the range of the agent's behavioral responses (again, with a very broad reading of behavior). Unlike *Criterion Features*, there is no counterfactual dependence on the presence of particular *Response Individuating Features* for the appropriateness of a particular character evaluation. Recall that for an evaluation of compassion, potential *Criterion Features* are restricted to instances where, for example, there is someone in need of help or comfort. There are no such restrictions for *Response Individuating Features*. *Response Individuating Features* should, however, detail as much as possible the full range of the agent opportunities for trait-relevant responses to the *Criterion Features*.

To help understand this definition of consistency, consider the following “counterfactual reaction profile” in Table 3. For each counterfactual reaction profile, it can be assumed that each trait-relevant response is occurring with regularity significantly above chance. The trait depicted below results in consistent by **Consistency**.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 3: General Counterfactual Reaction Profile<sup>6</sup>**

	Criterial Feature (1)	Criterial Feature (2)	Criterial Feature (3)
Response Individuating Feature (1)	Trait-relevant response (1)		
Response Individuating Feature (2)			
Response Individuating Feature (3)			
	Trait-relevant response (2)		

Tables 4-6 depict potential counterfactual reaction profiles for compassion. For the sake of clarity, the trait-relevant behavior is only overt behavior.

<sup>5</sup> Counterfactual Reaction Profile style from Alfano (2013).

<sup>6</sup> It is only for simplicity sake that Table 3 has three *Criterial Feature* columns and three *Relevant Situational Condition* rows. A counterfactual reaction profile could be constructed with many more rows and columns.



**Table 4: Inconsistent Counterfactual Reaction Profile**

	Lost Child	Seriously Injured Bystander	Individual in Mourning
Good Mood	Renders help to the individual in need.	Does not render help to the individual in need.	Renders help to the individual in need.
Neutral Mood	Renders help to the individual in need.	Does not render help to the individual in need.	
Bad Mood	Renders help to the individual in need.		

**Table 5: Potential Compassion Counterfactual Reaction Profile**

	Lost Child	Seriously Injured Bystander	Individual in Mourning
Good Mood	Renders help to the individual in need.		
Neutral Mood	Does not render help to the individual in need.		
Bad Mood			

**Table 6: Potential Compassion Counterfactual Reaction Profile**

	Lost Child	Seriously Injured Bystander	Individual in Mourning
No other potential helpers present	Renders help to the individual in need.		
At least one other potential helper present	Does not render help to the individual in need.		

Notice that Tables 4-6 have the same *Criteria Features*, which collectively are opportunities to show compassion. A lost child, an injured bystander, or someone in mourning provide appropriate opportunities for compassion. The *Response Individuating Features* provide the full range of the agent opportunities. The trait depicted in Table 4 fails to be consistent by **Consistency**. In rows 1 and 2, the trait-relevant behavior varies between compassion-relevant behaviors (e.g., helping the lost child) to failures of the same kind of behavior (e.g., failing to help the seriously injured bystander). While row 3 indicates the same compassion-relevant behavior for each *Criteria features*, **Consistency** demands this be the case for each *Response Individuating Feature* row.<sup>7</sup>

Tables 5 and 6 are indicative of a trait that meets the requirements of **Consistency**, though neither is necessarily to be identified with compassion. In reality, we might expect the *Response Individuating Features* to be a bit more complicated and finely grained (e.g., Good mood, no other potential helpers, appropriate lighting, safe area etc.). However, given much of the evidence from social psychology, there are at least some *Response*

<sup>7</sup> It could be the case that **Consistency** would be secured with different *Response Individuating Features* in rows 1 and 2, while row 3 remained the same. But as it stands, Table 4 is not indicative of **Consistency**.

*Individuating Features* that have powerful enough influences on responses such that a counterfactual reaction profile would not be overly complicated.

There are important limits on what kinds of features can be *Response Individual Features* for fulfilling the requirements of **Consistency**. For example, the *trait-irrelevant* features discussed in chapter 3 could not function as *Response Individuating Features* for **Consistency**. By definition, the *trait-irrelevant* features are minor and morally irrelevant features shown to have a significant influence on behavior. But their effect on behavior is not enough to sustain certain behavior responses across multiple situations. Indeed, they are partially of interest particularly because they coincide with inconsistent behavior. For example, the while finding a dime in a phone booth was related in helpfulness in the associated experimental conditions, it is not as though all helpful behavior is tied to the finding of dimes. If it were the case that a certain situational feature largely determined behavior, it would hardly be indicative of inconsistent behavior. It's certainly possible that some surprisingly findings in the experimental data may turn out to be a very strong determinate of behavior, but this would require additional analysis. In any event, if this were the case, it would no longer qualify as a *trait-irrelevant* factor, in which case it would no longer be a part of the situationist data.

With a more detailed conception of consistency in mind, I turn to specific accounts of virtue and character that argue that most people do, in fact, possess consistent traits. If they are correct, defenders of virtue ethics can resist charges of pervasive behavioral inconsistency.

#### **IV. Responses to Charges of Inconsistency**

Within the character debate, a popular way of answering charges of behavioral inconsistency is to make use of a distinction made prominent by Mischel and colleagues (Mischel and Shoda 1995; Shoda 1999) of *nominal* features and *psychological* features.

Importantly, the use of the term *nominal* here is not the common parlance of philosophical discussion. A nominal feature is an objective feature of a situation, such as the presence of absence of a particular object. Nominal features are readily identifiable from a 3<sup>rd</sup> person perspective. Another way of thinking about nominal features is that they are how an experimenter would describe the experimental conditions of their study. Psychological features are aspects of a situation as interpreted by someone in the situation. For example, Jamie is talking a walk through the forest, and notices a rustling bush nearby and quickly turns around and sprints away. A nominal feature of the situation is the moving bush, and so we might index Jamie's retreat with respect to a rustling bush. But suppose Jamie had interpreted the rustling bush as an indication of a dangerous animal. Describing Jamie's response by a psychological feature would be to index the retreat with respect to a construal of danger or a reasons-to-flee, not a rustling bush.

Snow (2010) and Russell (2009) argue that the appearance of pervasive behavioral inconsistency results from over focusing on the nominal features of situations found in the relevant psychological experiments (e.g., the presence of fragrant, freshly baked bread), rather than psychological features relative to the subjects in those experiments (e.g., the subject's pleasant mood). That is, the *Response Individuating Features* mentioned above should be characterized by psychological features of the individual whose response is being observed. The general flavor of the response by Snow and Russell is that by downplaying, or even ignoring, the psychological features salient to the agent, it is easy to misconstrue certain patterns of overt behavior as inconsistent. While the finding of a dime or the smell of fresh bread significantly changing someone's helpfulness might seem to support claims of inconsistency, if categorized

instead with respect to the person's mood or, better yet, their construal of the situation as demanding helpfulness, the inconsistency disappears.

Both Snow and Russell are interested in securing a version of consistency supported by empirical observation.<sup>8</sup> This is in line with the interest in psychological realism discussed in chapter 2. Snow and Russell's respective theories of virtue are informed by the cognitive-affective personality system (CAPS) model of human behavior. The CAPS model supposedly justifies shifting the focus from nominal to psychological features of the situation for discussions of consistency.

## **V. The CAPS Model of Consistency**

The CAPS model was first proposed by Mischel and Shoda (1995) as a way of re-categorizing the structure of human personality.<sup>9</sup> Part of the motivation for the development of the CAPS model was a response to the apparent inadequacy of many traditional understandings of traits as broad-based overt behavioral dispositions. Instead, the CAPS model focuses on the specific capacities, processes, and psychological states of the individual. This includes particular information encoding strategies, self-regulatory systems, and stimulus outcome expectancies (among many others).<sup>10</sup> The CAPS model characterizes behavior not merely as response to particular stimuli, but also as deriving from the individual understanding of themselves in a particular situation. By including the personal understanding of oneself in the situation, behavior can seem less inconsistent. For example, in understanding someone's reaction to being chastised, it is not enough that they are being chastised by someone. What also needs to be considered is if the individual *understands* themselves as being chastised by a peer or an authority figure, viz.,

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<sup>8</sup> Snow (2010); Russell (2009)

<sup>9</sup> Many preliminaries to the CAPS model were outlined in Mischel (1973).

<sup>10</sup> Miller (2014: 112).

what is salient to the subject.<sup>11</sup> By only focusing on the nominal features of the situation (subject is being chastised in the cafeteria), the features of the situation that the subject is reacting to are incomplete. Keeping with same example, even if an observer knows that the chastiser is an authority figure, this isn't necessarily the same as how the subject understands the chastiser. If the observer is not categorizing the situational features in the same way as the subject, behavior might be miscategorized as inconsistent.

Further preciosities of the CAPS model are unneeded, as there is little that seems controversial with respect to potential applications to virtue and virtue theory.<sup>12</sup> The CAPS model emphasizes subjective construal and salience of features of the situation (i.e., psychological features) as the proper focus for determining consistency. This provides for an empirical account of what many defenders of virtue ethics cite as reasons to doubt to the force of situationist criticism.<sup>13</sup> Evidence cited by situationist highlights the influence of nominal features of the situation, and not the psychological features. While the CAPS model seems to offer an effective way of explaining away inconsistency, it invites problems as a model for understanding virtue. For the remainder of this section, I present Russel and Snow endorsement the CAPS model and their attempt at avoiding the inconsistency charges of the situationist.

Russell clearly pushes concerns for consistency to the psychological, as he notes “since it is the *subject's* personality that is in question, it seem appropriate to classify situations and behaviors from the subject's point of view, in which case differences in observed behaviors are less interesting than differences in how subjects view their surroundings and adjust their

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<sup>11</sup> Snow (2010:18-23).

<sup>12</sup> It's worth noting that some, like Christian Miller, argue that the CAPS model is little more than a re-packaged model of uncontroversial elementals of folk psychology. See Miller (2014:105-128).

<sup>13</sup> Kamtekar (2004) emphasizes the importance of such features over the nominal, though not quite in the language of CAPS.

behaviors to them.”<sup>14</sup> Additionally, he specifically cautions against the use of nominal consistency, since even if one were to observe consistent behavior across nominally different situations, chances are it is not the same, or even similar, psychological structures that are causing same behavior. This is important for Russell’s account, as he wants to identify virtue, in part, with responsiveness to particular reasons for action.<sup>15</sup> To be consistently compassionate, for Russell, is to consistently put others’ interest above one’s own in those situations appropriate to do so. While compassion-relevant behavior may result across a wide variety of nominal situations, this is not sufficient to conclude that the agent is being sensitive compassionate related reasons in each case. What is important is that, from the subject’s perspective, the situation provided appropriate reasons to be compassionate. Given the possible ambiguity in only interpreting situations based on nominal differences, virtue attribution based on purely nominal features may be premature or even inappropriate.

Snow raises similar worries as those voiced by Russell, and also argues for a conception of virtue that also relies on the CAPS model. With regard to consistency, Snow shares Russell’s worries about the overreliance on nominal features of a situation for determinations of consistency, and that the situationists’ insistence on nominal standards unfairly stacks the deck against defenders of virtue. Snow notes, “situationists define situations solely in terms of their [nominal] features... Mischel and Shoda thought that studying behavior in situations defined solely in [nominal] terms was the wrong place to look for behavioral consistency. When they redefined situations in terms of the meanings of situations have for subjects, they found evidence of behavioral regularities that cross objectively different situation-types.”<sup>16</sup> Snow goes on to cite a study tracking children’s behavior with respect to things like reprimands or verbal aggression

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<sup>14</sup> Russell (2009:245)

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>16</sup> Snow (2010:18)

from peers and adults, and that the behavior of these children was actually quite consistent when categorized by how the children construed the person giving out the reprimand (e.g., adult vs. peer), rather than nominal features (e.g., residence hall vs. cafeteria).<sup>17</sup>

The general strategy by defenders of virtue using the CAPS model is secure consistency by shifting focus from nominal to psychological features of a situation. On the surface, this seems to be a promising strategy, as much of the situationist evidence relies on apparent behavioral inconsistency with respect to nominal features. People were more helpful when they found a dime as opposed to an empty coin return, less likely to check on someone in danger when there were more people around, and more likely to administer increasingly dangerous electric shocks if there was a scientist standing next to them. But importantly not just any version of consistency will do. As Russell himself notes, “Pick any set of behaviors, and there will usually be *some* standard or other relative to which they can be assessed as consistent. The fact that an agent can generally find some standard relative to which his or her behaviors come out consistent is undeniable, but uninteresting.”<sup>18</sup> In short, the consistency for a virtue ethical theory needs to be normatively adequate as well as supported by empirical findings.

## **VI. Consistency and Normative Adequacy**

Not just any form of consistency will do for defenders of an empirically grounded theory of virtue.<sup>19</sup> The consistency should be identified *relative to* a normatively adequate standard. For virtue ethics, the standard of consistency can’t solely be consistent to the individual’s personal standards. Russell notes that “‘generosity by one’s own lights’ surely is not the same thing as generosity proper.”<sup>20</sup> Most patterns of behavior are consistent relative to some standard, but

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Russell (2009:301). See also similar comments in Doris (2002:76-85).

<sup>19</sup> Portions of the remaining sections are adapted from Doris and Spino (2015).

<sup>20</sup> Russell (2009:305).



many of these consistencies may be uninformative or trivial. The run of behaviors *a, d, g, h, j p, p, f, a* is consistent relative to the disposition (or family of dispositions) to produce just that run of behaviors – call it disposition **ADGHJPPFA**, but it's entirely unclear if such behaviors are motivated by, for example, the types of reasons for action that are of interest to the virtue ethicist. It hardly seems appropriate as the type of consistency virtue ethics is after. For example, take a very simple trait having to do with honesty, called “interval honesty.” Greg is possessed of interval honesty, which means that, like an athlete alternating periods of exertion and recovery, when Greg exercises honesty, he needs to “sit out” the next opportunity; Greg has psychological resources sufficient only to exercise honesty in every other honesty relevant situation. If we let *h* stand for honesty-relevant behavior, and *d* stand for dishonest-relevant behavior, Greg's behavior will look, quite uniformly, like this: ***hdhdhdhdhdhdhd***.

Greg's ***hdhdhdhdhdhdhd*** behavior is, in some sense, consistent; it is, as Russell or Snow might put it, behavior indicative of a consistent trait. The consistency, of course, is relative to psychological situations: ones where Greg is morally exhausted and ones where he is not. His exhaustion might cause him not to register the morally problematic features of the dishonest behavior he's engaging in. But nominal standards cannot completely drop out of the discussion for something like honesty. There is some evidence that people's attributive standards for honesty are rather demanding (Gidron et al. 1993); to earn the title of honesty, you have to be honest on some tolerably high percentage of the occasions where honesty is called for. That's not Greg, who is honest, at best about half the time. The general point is that identifying psychological consistency comes apart from nominal consistency.<sup>21</sup> One cannot, however, simply insist on nominal consistency as the only normatively adequate standard of consistency for virtue ethics without begging the question against those like Russell and Snow. But it is fair

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<sup>21</sup> Doris (2002: 76-85).

to insist that the psychological consistency endorsed by Russell and Snow also be normatively adequate.

Russell describes a normatively adequate form of consistency, under the CAPS model, as a consistent responsiveness “to reasons that can be endorsed in an overall way from within an ethical outlook in equilibrium.”<sup>22</sup> Exactly what counts as the right kinds of reasons is not developed by Russell or Snow, but this is not their goal. Russell’s account of a normatively adequate conception of virtue though seems to indirectly depend on nominal consistency, which he readily admits would be problematic.<sup>23</sup> But digging a bit deeper into Russell’s accounts reveals just this kind of problem.

Russell cites the importance of robust traits as those which “produce consistent behaviors across situations, where those behaviors are understood in psychological rather than nominal terms – as the just person would regard them, say.”<sup>24</sup> A crucial element to this standard though is the qualification of the psychological requirement being as the ‘just person would regard them’. Importantly, Russell here is talking about traits in general, not just the virtues. Couple this standard with the aforementioned responsiveness to ethically endorsable reasons, and Russell ends up endorsing an indirect nominal consistency standard for normative adequacy.

To see how Russell ends up falling into endorsing nominal consistency, consider a virtuous individual that is responsive to ethically endorsable reasons. Certainly, there are robust, purely psychological components to this individual’s perspective. Those situations construed as demanding compassionate or courageous action should (to a sufficient level of regularity) move the individual to the appropriate action in the right kind of way. But to be a fully endorsable perspective, there must be some kind of connection to objective features of the world. Even if the

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<sup>22</sup> Russell (2009: 329).

<sup>23</sup> Russell (2009:329).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

individual is responsive to all the right kinds of reasons when they notice them, but are constantly missing what, on reflection, are obvious reasons for and against certain action, this would hardly be an endorsable ethical position. If the standard of consistency can stop at purely subjective construal, then there appears to be little difference between someone being sensitive to and moved by morally relevant external factors, and the person that has such a warped perspective that nothing is worthy of their personal intervention. Consider the following tables representing a charitable trait by a virtuous agent and an Ebenezer Scrooge-type character. For the sake of simplify, assume the individual in question has a financial means to donate without significant cost to themselves.

**Table 7: Charity for the Virtuous Counterfactual Reaction Profile**

	Oxfam donation drive	Local soup kitchen	Panhandler
Charity is understood as worthy of support	Renders help to the individual in need.		
Charity is understood as not worthy of support	Does not render help to the individual in need.		

**Table 8: Charity for Ebenezer Scrooge-type Counterfactual Reaction Profile**

	Oxfam donation drive	Local soup kitchen	Panhandler
Charity is understood as worthy of support	Renders help to the individual in need.		
Charity is understood as not worthy of support	Does not render help to the individual in need.		

If the *Response Individuating Features* can be completely severed from nominal features, the virtuous and Scrooge-type both appear to have the same trait, given they both act on their considered judgments regarding the charity. This exemplifies precisely the problem with purely psychological accounts of consistency of the kind endorsed by Snow and Russell.

To be clear, I am not demanding that normative adequacy for consistency is restricted to nominal concerns. Keeping with the above theme, a person doesn't lose the title of charity because they pass on opportunities to give to causes they see as unworthy when most other might judge otherwise. The attribution of charity seems to require consistent giving (within a person's means) to causes the person *judges* to be worthwhile. If that's true, specification of psychological situations is integral to determining if someone has a consistent trait of charity. But however the specifics of consistency get sorted out, it needs to get sorted out in a way that limits individual latitude: Ebenezer Scrooge isn't charitable. In short, nominal features are necessary for a normatively adequate account of consistency. Not to the exclusion of the psychological of course. But ignoring the nominal completely in the name of securing *some* kind of consistency results in a rather strange normative standard where individual perspectives can

make all the difference. If the only standard is psychological, it seems quite easy to act, characteristically, as the virtuous agent would. Taking on nominal demands for consistency, of course, makes virtue ethicists more vulnerable to situationist worries, but the strategy for avoiding such an issue is done at the expense of normative adequacy.<sup>25</sup>

Insisting on purely psychological accounts of consistency can also put an account of virtue at odds with some foundational concepts found in Aristotle's original work. While it is not required that virtue ethics always connect with Aristotle, enough proponents of virtue ethics draw inspiration from the *Nicomachean Ethics* that some incompatibility is worth noting. In Book III, chapter 1, Aristotle distinguishes between voluntary, involuntary, and nonvoluntary actions. In short, voluntary actions have their cause from the agent and are not due to ignorance. The actions which are not voluntary are the one of interest here (*EN* 111-b25-111a7). Involuntary actions are *caused by* ignorance, where the agent is unaware certain particulars of a situation, such as an agent thinking they are about to take a bite of a fresh apple, but it turns out to be a decorative piece of plastic fruit. Nonvoluntary actions are *done in* ignorance, where the agent understands the particulars of a situation, but is ignorant of the *kind* of action they are going to take. For example, someone steals from the local Salvation Army, fully aware of what they are doing and knowing the consequences, but not appreciating that this cannot be a right action. But certain Nonvoluntary actions, characterized by purely psychological features and understood as the product of a trait of some kind, could end up structurally looking like a virtue. The agent performs actions they understand as permissible for themselves, and does not perform

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<sup>25</sup> Snow (2010:106-108) pushes too far in the direction of holding subjective construal as the only important standard of consistency.

those understood as impermissible. Without any limits on how the psychological features structure consistency, a trait qualifying as consistent can be a rather vacuous distinction.<sup>26</sup>

The CAPS model, endorsed by Russell and Snow, is not the only approach to an empirically grounded theory of character. In the next section, I discuss a novel approach to character that is, in part, meant to show a new way of understanding the current state of most people's character that also secures an empirically adequate conception of consistency without the problems of the CAPS model.

## VII. Mixed Traits (Miller)

Miller addresses the issue of inconsistency as well, though not in the way that most defenders of virtue ethics do. He argues that traditional virtues and vices are largely absent from the human population. Miller insists, however, that human behavior is frequently ordered by *global* traits. Without necessarily endorsing any particular version of virtue ethics, Miller denies the situationist claim regarding pervasive behavioral consistency.

According to Miller (2014: 195), there is a type of trait widely instantiated in the human population, which he calls "mixed." Mixed traits are *neither* virtues nor vices; they do not reliably dispose the possessor to good or bad behavior in across situations (Miller 2014: 207-209). Rather than having virtues or vices, the vast majority of people possess such traits as mixed aggression traits, mixed helping traits, mixed cheating traits, and so on -- traits which sometimes issue in behavior conforming to the behavior type featured in their names, and other times the opposite. But these traits are supposed to be operative across a wide range of situations, and therefore deserve to be termed *global*. Recall from chapter 2 that *global* traits are those that are stable and consistent. Thus, while Miller argues for a globalist theory of character, he

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<sup>26</sup> Shifting to the discussion to consistency of proper understanding of situations and actions can fall prey to a whole other area of troubling inconsistency. See Olin and Doris (2014).

remains a skeptic about virtue and vice; although global traits are widely instantiated, consistent virtues and vices aren't.

Miller (2013; 2014) offers detailed consideration of the various psychological experiments cited by situationists without attempting to deny the relevance of the data. He does, however, deny that the data demonstrates behavioral inconsistency. Like Snow and Russell, Miller stresses the importance of the psychological features for consistency considerations of mixed traits; activation or inhibition of mixed traits by psychological features effects orderly patterns of trait-relevant behavior. For example, suppose a person consistently helps in situations when they are in a good mood and consistently *doesn't* help when in a bad mood. While these people are not globally helpful, so the story goes, they are globally mood-dependent-helpful. For Miller, mixed traits are an empirically supported type of global trait that is widely instantiated in the population (Miller 2014: 195, 200). One important difference to the CAPS approach endorsed by Snow and Russell is that Miller is not maintaining a consistency based on personal construal of the situation, but a consistency with respect what activates or inhibits various traits of character. Construal can be allowed to vary widely. Consistency is found from the regular activation or inhibiting of mixed-trait expression by particular psychological processes. For example, the consistency of the mixed-helping trait is supported by guilt regularly activating that trait across a wide variety of circumstances. Miller preserves reference to nominal features, which induce guilt, but maintains the importance of psychological processes.

Miller's position appears well equipped to handle much of the situationist skepticism leveled at global character traits. But matters become more complicated when one considers just how many enhancers and inhibitors may be at work in a single mixed trait. Consider the example of someone alleviating guilt by helping others. All else being equal, helping while

guilty is supposed to be consistent across a wide-variety of situations. But it's not just guilt that is relevant to helping. On Miller's (2013: 183) own description, there are many additional psychological factors beyond guilt that need to be accounted for, such as emotions, beliefs, and desires. When all of these factors are considered, it looks as though the relevant admixture of inhibitors and enhancers effecting any instance of helping behavior will approach the singular, meaning that behavior looks *highly* situationally specific. This seems to be just another way of getting to the situationist conclusion.

To put the above point another way, in situation *s*, say, *x* amount of guilt, *y* amount of embarrassment, *z* amount of anger (to name only three), plus beliefs and desires related to *s*-like situations, generally results in behavior *b*. It seems unreasonable to expect that the same psychological combination will ever occur again in a different situation. After all, any circumstance involves a large number of psychological features, some of which may be unique (or approaching unique), and these various features may figure in some indefinitely large number of combinations, which may themselves be unique (or approaching unique). For example, Sam is in a good mood today, but will Sam ever be in this *particular* good mood ever again, since Sam has just received their first tenure-track job? Alternatively, Sam was in a bad mood last fall, but will Sam ever be in that *particular* bad mood ever again since it was the result of a favorite sports team losing a championship and ruining their improbably perfect season? If so many psychological situations matter to mixed traits, and their appearance and combination in any given life cannot readily be expected to be highly reliable, consistency of behavior in this picture starts to look a bit strange. Consider the table below.



**Table 9: Mixed-helping trait<sup>27</sup>**

	Stranger asks for change for a dollar
Embarrassment > anger > guilt	Helps individual
Embarrassment > guilt > anger	Does not help individual
Anger > embarrassment > guilt	Helps individual
Anger > guilt > embarrassment	Helps individual
Guilt > embarrassment > anger	Does not help individual
Guilt > anger > embarrassment	Helps individual

Note that the “>” symbol is being used to indicate the relevant levels of the mental state disposition of the agent. “Embarrassment > anger > guilt” indicates that the agent feels more embarrassed than angry, and more angry than guilty. While this might be difficult to determine with any level of clarity in the real world, my argument does not turn on this determination. It is merely meant as a possible way in which someone’s mixed-trait might help determine behavior that is consistent with Miller’s account.

For the sake of argument, we can assume the agent in question will similarly make/not make change in repeated iterations of the same situation (levels of embarrassment, anger, and guilt, coupled with someone asking for change). With stability fixed, however, problems quickly surface when considering consistency. By definition, in order to be consistent, the agent’s behavior should remain the same as we expand the variety of the criterial features of the situation.

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<sup>27</sup> The varying levels of embarrassment, empathy, and guilt are merely meant to capture Miller’s conception of mixed-traits being dependent on the mental states of the agent for evaluating stability/consistency.

**Table 10: Mixed-helping trait<sup>28</sup>**

	Stranger asks for change for a dollar	Lost tourist asks for directions
Embarrassment > anger > guilt	Helps individual	Does not help individual
Embarrassment > guilt > anger	Does not help individual	Helps individual
Anger > embarrassment > guilt	Helps individual	Does not help individual
Anger > guilt > embarrassment	Helps individual	Helps individual
Guilt > embarrassment > anger	Does not help individual	Helps individual
Guilt > anger > embarrassment	Helps individual	Does not help individual

Here, as Miller predicts, we appear to have apparent behavioral inconsistency. But supposedly the inconsistency vanishes when we *also* consider things like the beliefs and desires of the agent. Consider the first row of the table, where the agent makes change for a dollar, but doesn't direct the lost tourist. The inconsistency might be explained away by the presence of specific beliefs and desires regarding helping each of the people in need, perhaps beliefs about tourists ruining the regular traffic flow. Or perhaps the belief that making change for a stranger will alleviate some of the felt embarrassment, but directing a tourist will not. Of course, if beliefs and desires are making a significant difference, the table needs to be expanded with more rows. The problem, as mentioned earlier, is that the relevant conditions would become increasingly specific to particular situations to explain away inconsistency.

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<sup>28</sup> The varying levels of embarrassment, empathy, and guilt are merely meant to capture Miller's conception of mixed-traits capturing the mental states of the agent for evaluating stability/consistency.

The above example seems to put Miller in an awkward position regarding an important *desideratum* in theory choice; *ceteris paribus*, simpler theories are preferred over more complex ones. How simplicity ought to be understood is, of course, the subject of much discussion.<sup>29</sup> But mixed traits, considering the numerousness of their situational inputs, psychological processes, and behavioral outputs, are anything but simple. But mere complexity is not, by itself, a reason to dismiss a theory; human psychology is complex, and a complex theory may be the only sort fit to secure psychological realism.<sup>30</sup>

The problem with the complexity of the mixed-trait account, however, is that it's hard to see what acting *inconsistently* is supposed to look like.<sup>31</sup> With so many enhancers and inhibitors at play for each trait, there will always be *some* combination of psychological factors relevant to one or another mixed trait. At least in the case of Russel and Snow's account, psychological features are indexed to construal. An agent can act *inconsistently* if, for example, they fail to act when they've deemed that they *should* act – recognition of personal failures is a familiar experience. Miller might avoid such a problem if he identified non-arbitrary standards for grouping together a particular set of beliefs, desires, and other psychological features of situations as the grounds for attributing a mixed trait. But on Miller's description of mixed traits, it looks like any psychological process associated with the behavior of interest -- or its absence -- is to be welcomed as another component of the mixed trait.<sup>32</sup> When providing a mixed trait explanation, one can always recruit additional psychological processes to demonstrate why it is

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<sup>29</sup> Mackonis (2013).

<sup>30</sup> Indeed, "local" trait theory (Doris 2002; Upton 2009), which also makes empirical adequacy paramount, may also fail standards of simplicity.

<sup>31</sup> Miller (2013: 20n38) briefly notes this worry; he suggests that mixed trait theory allows for inconsistency in terms of conflict between an actor's conscious and unconscious psychological states. This is an interesting response, but is in need of further development, since a mixed trait could be specified in terms of just such a conflict: e.g., a mixed aggression trait where the possessor is aggressive when experiencing a conflict between conscious deference and unconscious resentment and passive when the conflict is between conscious resentment and unconscious deference.

<sup>32</sup> For some of Miller's discussion of these issues, in particular with respect to mixed helping traits, see Miller (2013: 180-199).

the mixed trait helped produce the trait-relevant behavior. Aggression, for instance, could have been activated by feelings of anger, frustration, shame, or a desire to maintain a positive self-image. This is only a partial list, which Miller (2013: 271-272) claims isn't comprehensive; the concern is that the inclusion of so many enhancers and inhibitors means the mixed trait construct can be so extensively qualified that there ceases to be any kind of trait-relevant behavior that is inconsistent with a trait the agent possesses. To say someone's aggression was due to her possession of a mixed aggression trait reduces to saying her aggression was caused, in part, by the agent's psychology.

If inconsistent trait-relevant behavior becomes nearly impossible, the familiar thought that people sometimes act "out of character" does so as well. It seems right to say that most people do not act in accordance with their character, whatever form it may take, 100% of the time. But on the mixed trait framework, one can explain *any* behavior as being in-character -- in some *mixed*-character, that is. The person who fails to act helpfully in circumstances where they have always done so previously can be said to be acting in character after all; on the mixed trait framework, there may be a novel psychological situation such that, were we aware of it, we would expect the behavior that was observed. For example, suppose Sara has been observed consistently being helpful when in a good mood, and consistently unhelpful when in a bad mood, but is then seen being consistently helpful even in situations where her mood is especially foul. Say it turns out that Sara's helpfulness has been significantly enhanced by the presence of her co-workers at a new job, where she is trying to foster friendships with a new peer group (and no additional helpfulness is observed elsewhere). The desire for acceptance could just be taken as a new feature of her mixed-helpfulness trait, rather than a significant departure from her character.

Miller should not be cast as a defender of virtue ethics (*pace* Annas 2011: 173n8), and so the worries I am raising with respect to his views are not its incompatibility with certain forms of virtue ethics. The problem, as I see it, is that the incredible complexity of the mixed-trait framework make inconsistent or “out of character” behavior nearly impossible. Miller’s theory of character, then, loses important phenomena of generally accepted understandings of character. Mixed-trait theory, as defined earlier, fails to be empirically adequate, and thus hardly seems suitable as a model of baseline character in the empirically minded character debate.

### **VIII. Concluding Thoughts**

In the preceding discussion, I’ve considered two approaches to securing some form of consistency to answer situationist charges of pervasive behavioral inconsistency. For the CAPS models of Russell and Snow, my primary worry was that it goes too far in emphasizing the psychological features over nominal features. Neglecting nominal features results in a lack of normative adequacy. Judgments regarding virtue are evaluative judgments, referencing evaluative standards, and it is plausibly thought that these standards have to do with nominal features of the situation. If there’s a virtue of honesty, someone like Greg, with his interval honesty, certainly doesn’t have it. But if while in the exhausted state, Greg never construes situations as demanding honesty from *him*, then he appears to meet the standards of acting consistency given by the CAPS models. It is strange to claim that the standard of consistency relevant for the virtue of honesty would not involve nominal situations.

For Miller’s mixed-trait theory, the general worry is that consistency is secured much too easily, and so the very possibility of inconsistent or “out of character” behavior disappears. While Miller does not have a specific theory of virtue he is defending, he does think that he can respond to the main criticism from situationists that our behavior fails to follow from any

empirically recognizable consistent trait. If Miller is right, defenders of virtue ethics would have a much more secure starting point for showing how one can start on the path to being virtuous. It would, in part, address the worry from chapter 2 of virtue expecting us to develop from non-global traits to global ones. Miller theory, however, fails as an empirically adequate theory, as it does not accommodate recognizable phenomena from philosophical and everyday understandings of character.

## **CHAPTER 5: PROMISING APPROACHES TO VIRTUE ETHICS**

### **I. Introduction**

The focus of the preceding chapters has been to show why many contemporary approaches to virtue ethics face serious difficulties in light of empirically-based criticism from situationists. Specifically, many approaches to virtue ethics which maintain the importance of global traits of character, which are necessary for virtue possession, have serious problems as to their relevance for human beings, such as they are. Overall the discussion has been largely critical of the virtue ethics tradition. Importantly though, the real target of criticism has been the particular structure of global traits, not virtue ethics as a whole. While many versions of virtue ethics are committed to the actual instantiation of global traits, there are accounts without such a commitment. In this chapter, I discuss what I consider to be the two of the most promising virtue ethical accounts, which are categorized as *instrumentalist* accounts of virtue, that are not threatened by situationist worries. Additionally, I discuss the important structural differences between instrumentalist accounts of virtue and that majority of virtue ethical accounts discussed thus far, as well as some objections to the instrumentalist approaches I highlight.

In section II, I give an overview of instrumentalist accounts of virtue, and the main points of difference between them and the globalist accounts discussed thus far. Section III goes into the specifics of two prominent instrumentalist accounts, namely Julia Driver and Lorraine Besser-Jones' respective accounts. This will set the stage for the investigation of attempted applications of virtue ethics to normative business ethics, which is the focus of the final chapter.

## II. Instrumentalist Accounts of Virtue

A theory of virtue is *instrumentalist* just in case there is no dependence on intrinsic value to any individual state of character and the value of states of character is determined by how effective it is in bringing about particular states of affairs. Instrumentalist theories of virtue, while often maintaining the importance of a realistic moral psychology, are not committed to the global trait view so common in the virtue ethics literature that has been discussed throughout this dissertation.

In its general structure, instrumentalist accounts of virtue are similar to certain consequentialist approaches to ethics.<sup>1</sup> In consequentialist moral theories, particular act-types do not have an intrinsic moral value. The moral value of the act is determined by the particular consequences caused by the act. Lying, for example, is morally good or bad depending on what results from the actual lie. The particular consequentialist account needs to specify which consequences are to be evaluated, be it by levels of pleasure, happiness, or preference satisfaction, to name only a few. Similarly, instrumentalist accounts of virtue must specify what particular states of character should help produce in order to determine the particular value of those states of character. As a result, the virtuous state(s) of character may vary widely from traditional virtue ethical accounts.

The importance of consistency for many traditional accounts of virtue ethics is not necessarily found in instrumentalist accounts. A particular range of trait-relevant behaviors across a range of situational features is not required for any particular trait to produce the targeted instrumental value. Indeed, as is made clearer in later sections, proponents of

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<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with consequentialist instrumental theories of virtue (e.g., Driver 2001) which I discuss below. The analogy here is just to help clarify what an instrumental theory of virtue actually is.



instrumentalist views should be troubled little by the seemingly fragmentary nature of our characters.

With these preliminaries out of the way, I now turn to two well-developed instrumental accounts that both avoid the problems of situationism and also provide a robust account of virtue that is quite compatible with much of the psychological data available.

### **III. Specific Instrumentalist Accounts of Virtue**

#### ***a. Driver***

Julia Driver's consequentialist account of virtue mimics the surface simplicity of other consequentialist theories. For Driver, a virtue is "a character trait (disposition or cluster of dispositions) that, generally speaking, produces good consequences for others."<sup>2</sup> As is clear from the rendering, Driver's account allows for immense flexibility as to what exactly counts as a virtue. Her account further subdivides virtues as being moral virtues or prudential virtues. Moral virtues are those traits which generate the greatest benefit for others, while prudential virtues benefit the agent who possess the virtue.<sup>3</sup> For example, a trait which disposes the individual toward sacrificing their own time and resources toward furthering the safety of others is an example of a moral virtue. In contrast, an example of a prudential virtue would be something like a "silver tongue", where one is able to quickly and easily persuade others to a particular point of view. Moral and prudential virtues can clearly come apart, as evidenced by Driver's own example of complete self-sacrifice as an example of a moral virtue. The soldier that throws himself on top of the enemy grenade that was lobbed into their squad clearly produces good consequences for others, but is certainly gaining no personal benefit from sacrificing their life in this way.

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<sup>2</sup> Driver (2001:60).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

There is of course much more to Driver's account than my brief overview. The point I am trying to make though is that it is not a mere conceptual possibility that some accounts of virtue ethics are not threatened by situationist criticism. This is not to say that Driver's consequentialist view of virtue is without its own difficulties. Driver endorsement of consequences being the determining factor for the value of traits unsurprisingly inherits some of the difficulties commonly posed to more general consequentialist views. But then, such difficulties hardly leave consequentialist views without supporters.

Given that Driver's account is a radical departure from traditional accounts of virtue, it comes as little surprise that her view has come under criticism for just such a departure. Snow argues that Driver's account allows for virtues without that "appropriate motivation and practical wisdom" found in traditional accounts of, for example, justice.<sup>4</sup> The worry by Snow here is that the officer of the court who executes their duties from the kinds of trait(s) normally attributed to traditional accounts of virtue is no different from the officer that does their job purely for political gains (assuming they have equal success). Snow notes, "On Driver's view, the traits that count as virtues are unrecognizable as virtues."<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, Snow doesn't elaborate much on this point, and as it stands, the complaint is a bit shallow.<sup>6</sup> That Driver's view may be a bit counter-intuitive to what we normally think of as virtues is certainly true, but this is hardly a good reason to dismiss the view out of hand. The traditional conception of virtue that Snow compares Driver's view to is largely in trouble, given the situationist worries discussed throughout this dissertation. While I will not pretend to speak for Driver, it doesn't seem all that strange to consider switching from a normatively troubled account for virtue, unsuitable for human beings such as they are, to an empirically viable and tractable approach to virtue.

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<sup>4</sup> Snow (2010:6).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> In this section of Snow's book, she goes on to similarly give brief criticisms of other approaches to virtue ethics.

***b. Besser-Jones***

Besser-Jones' theory of virtue is unabashedly empirically minded. She commits to *moderate psychological realism*, which sets up much of the direction and tone for her eudaimonic approach to virtue ethics. *Moderate psychological realism* is the view that moral theorizing should be restricted to "a psychologically realistic understanding of what sorts of behavior, belief formation, and decision-making processes can be reasonably expected of people."<sup>7</sup> There is no ambiguity here as to whether or not the goal is the actual instantiation of virtue on the agent. Besser-Jones' identifies three fundamental psychological needs that are necessary to fulfill in order for us to experience eudaimonic well-being: relatedness, autonomy, and competence.<sup>8</sup> The most effective strategies for fulfilling these three needs provides the normative structure of how to best conduct our lives. Relatedness is achieved when we feel and judge ourselves to have, overall, positive relations with those around us. Autonomy and competence involve the identification of and endorsement of personal goals and the achievement of said goals experienced with some level of proficiency, respectively. It is undeniable that there is a subjective element to the fulfillment of these goals, which naturally raises questions about "inauthentic" achievement. Inauthentic is the sense that, despite experiencing myself as relating to most or all of my peers, in reality I have failed miserably according to those same peers. Is it right to say I've fulfilled my need for relatedness if most of my peers are really just putting up a good front? If I join in on belittling a minority group in order to bond with certain other groups in power, am I simply pursuing my well-being in a different way? Besser-Jones addresses many such worries throughout the by citing results from various psychological studies which purportedly address these worries. For example, while it may not seem that I have reason to care

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<sup>7</sup> Besser-Jones (2014:6).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

about the cold stares from groups I've cheerfully ostracized with my friends, there is a negative toll on my well-being nonetheless, which should disincentivize such behavior with respect to securing well-being.<sup>910</sup>

Besser-Jones maintains that our own proper functioning is, by itself, a valuable goal, something that we ought to pursue. While the goal is more modest than the traditional Aristotelian conception of the "good life", which Besser-Jones acknowledges, this particular end is argued to have significant value nonetheless. This is another instance of an approach to virtue ethics which does not hold that all moral worth is reducible to traits and virtues. Particular traits are better suited for flourishing than others insofar as they contribute more to the individual's well-being through the satisfaction of the aforementioned psychological needs.

As mentioned earlier though, there is undoubtedly the potential for an inaccurate, albeit convincing, perspective on the part of the agent with respect to whether psychological needs have genuinely been fulfilled. Throughout the text, Besser-Jones maintains a pluralistic outlook on states of character and virtue, much like Swanton, where multiple approaches to fulfilling psychological needs may all contribute to well-being roughly equally; there no single privileged set of traits or virtues everyone should pursue.<sup>11</sup> One worry is that even if the more authentic route of relatedness may lead to greater gross fulfillment of one's psychological needs, the effort expended in forming such bonds may put exceptionally high demands on time and effort. As a result, there may be an opportunity cost detrimental to pursuing other important needs. While this doesn't threaten the internal structure of Besser-Jones' proposal, it may lead to some uncomfortable recommendations for securing the best overall fulfillment of psychological needs. I only raise this point because Besser-Jones appears to go out of her way to establish her

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 40.

<sup>10</sup> Even non-human "peers", like a computer program. See Besser-Jones (2014:41).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

approach to virtue as being compatible with traditional understandings of virtue. This is important, as my complaint about “uncomfortable recommendations” of virtue mirrors Snow’s worry about Driver’s account. Unlike Driver, Besser-Jones explicitly wishes to maintain a connection to traditional conceptions of virtue, so the worry here is apt. As a point in favor of Besser-Jones’ account, something I have argued defenders of traditional accounts of virtue ethics must do, is that she offers some practical commentary and advice on exactly how we could go about fulfilling the important psychological needs driving much of the theory, and developing the kinds of traits she has in mind.

#### **IV. The Way Forward**

Perhaps more than any other prominent moral theory, virtue ethics has come under intense empirical criticism. As I’ve argued throughout this dissertation, I think much of this criticism is well-founded, and that proponents of virtue ethics should either pursue radical new approaches to their theories of virtue (e.g., instrumentalist approaches), or focus efforts on empirically grounded developmental paths to the types of global traits so important to many of these theories.

Even equipped with a developmental story for virtue, I don’t think the general situationist criticism of virtue ethics is the only major challenge to virtue ethical moral theories. I believe there’s a legitimate worry for virtue ethics in its application to many applied areas of ethics, such as business, biomedical, and environmental ethics. While virtue ethics can cede some ground to the situationist and come up with developmental stories, or affirm a purely evaluative role, such responses have a more difficult time gaining purchase in applied ethics. In short, the problems posed by situationism are more acute in applied ethics than they are in normative ethics. In the next and final chapter, I argue that in the case of normative business ethics, the character-based

tradition is especially threatened by situationist arguments. Given the failure of the virtue ethical model in business ethics, one can legitimately raise questions regarding the potential of virtue ethics in other applied realms. If a moral theory fails in multiple applied areas, I think there is reason to be concerned about that moral theory's suitability as a general normative theory.

## CHAPTER 6: PROBLEMS FOR CHARACTER-BASED BUSINESS ETHICS

### I. Introduction

Many business ethicists endorse a broadly virtue ethical framework as the most promising normative theory of business ethics. In large part, virtue ethical approaches to business ethics cite the development of *global* character traits in employees and managers as ways of promoting right action (e.g., Solomon, 1999; Hartman, 2006, 2008; Melé, 2009; Provis, 2010; Sinnicks, 2014). Call such views *character-based business ethics* (CBE).<sup>1</sup> Many character-based approaches to ethical thought have their roots in Aristotelian virtue ethics. Aristotle (2000: 1105a27-b1) describes virtuous action as, in part, proceeding from “a firm and unchangeable character.” Some philosophers, known as *situationists* (e.g., Doris, 2002; Harman, 1999; Merritt et al., 2010), however, claim that experimental results from social psychology indicate that global character traits have limited behavioral influence, if any. As a result, situationists claim many character-based ethical theories are woefully inadequate as normative theories for human beings such as they are.

Situationist arguments have been leveled against CBE (e.g., Harman, 2003), and have been responded to in kind (e.g., Solomon, 2003; Hartman, 2008; Alzola, 2008, 2012).

Unfortunately, proponents of CBE have failed at times to be sensitive to the particular demands of business ethics while responding to situationist arguments. Defenders of CBE respond as

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<sup>1</sup> Business ethics is, of course, sometimes focused on whether or not businesses have an obligation beyond increasing profits for their shareholders (e.g., Freedman, 1970; Freeman, 1984, 1994; Allhoff and Vaidya, 2005). For instance, considerations of worker safety may be important because of obligations to employee safety or for avoidance of costly litigation (Allhoff, 2011). Fortunately, for my purposes, either side of this divide is committed to the same kinds of vulnerabilities I have in mind for CBE. There is at least one tradition within business ethics that my arguments do not speak to, which is the interpretive project concerned with *how actually* businesses navigate ethically relevant situations, rather than *how should* businesses best navigate such situations. Here I am only targeting normative CBE.

though they were defending a more general virtue ethical theory rather than a normative theory of business ethics. While general normative theories and normative theories of business ethics are closely related, normative theories of business ethics have particular demands for their adequacy not always required of more general theories. If there were not such particular demands on normative business ethics, the need for rigorous and varied research into *business* ethics would be diminished. I argue that many prominent responses appropriate for defending a general virtue ethical theory against situationist criticism are ineffective in defending CBE. A well-accepted evaluative framework for normative theories of business ethics (i.e., Bishop (2000)) highlights the importance of normative theories of business ethics providing practical action guidance. The most obvious kind of action guidance that remains true to a virtue ethical approach to business ethics is significantly undermined by situationist arguments. Accordingly, CBE is in need of novel responses to situationism or radical revision.

In Section II, I explain the evaluative framework I use to assess CBE, focusing on the importance of action guidance. Section III explains what is meant by a character-based approach to business ethics and what CBE action guidance might look like. The threat from situationism is explained in Section IV, and a review of some of the empirical data used by situationist to support their argument is detailed in Section V. In Section VI, I identify some of the more promising responses to situationism and argue why such responses are inappropriate for defending CBE. I consider some objections to my arguments in Section VII and offer a few replies. Finally, in Section VIII, I suggest some potential ways CBE could be revised in order to avoid situationist arguments.



## II. Normative Theories of Business Ethics

My argument that CBE is particularly vulnerable to situationist criticism stems from CBE being a form of normative business ethics. There are certain generally accepted requirements for a normative theory of business ethics that are not always applied to general normative theories. By general normative theories I mean familiar theories like utilitarianism or Kantian ethics that are often discussed in terms their overall structure and prescriptions on moral agents. As the great body of continuing scholarship indicates, there is much to talk about regarding general normative theories outside of the context of particular areas of interest, like the environment, medicine, and of course business. While there are clear connections between, for example, social contract theory (e.g., Rawls (1971)) and a social contract theory for business (e.g., Bishop (2000)), such theories tackle different problems. I expect none of this is particularly controversial, as research in applied ethics continues to thrive alongside its normative ethics counterpart. For my present purposes, the natural question to ask is which demands from normative business ethics are supposed to make CBE more vulnerable to situationist criticism.

Defining business ethics has never been easy, as indicated by some scholars likening it to “nailing jello to a wall.”<sup>2</sup> One textual analysis and survey of business ethics scholars proposed that the definition of business ethics that best captures the focus of the discipline is “moral rules, standards, codes, or principles which provide guidelines for right and truthful behavior in specific situations.”<sup>3</sup> While broad, this definition clearly picks out the importance of practicality and action guidance. A more detailed framework has been proposed in the business ethics literature that has been met with general approval. Continuing off the work of Hasnas (1998),

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis (1985:377).

<sup>3</sup> Lewis (1985: 382), emphasis added.

Bishop (2000) identifies seven requirements of a business ethics theory.<sup>4</sup> The business ethical theories success at meeting these requirements can be used to evaluate its promise as a potential normative theory for business. Bishop argues that a normative business ethical theory clearly identify the following.<sup>5</sup>

- (1) The recommended values of the theory
- (2) The grounds for accepting those values from (1)
- (3) A decision principle that business people who accept the theory can use
- (4) Who the normative theory applies to (i.e., which agents)
- (5) Whose interests need to be considered (i.e., the scope of the decision principle from (3))
- (6) What contexts the normative theory applies
- (7) What legal and regulatory structures the theory assumes

Through the specification of (1) – (7), the business ethical theory fulfills its role of identifying “what is ethical, not what the members of some group think is ethical.”<sup>6</sup> Bishop’s framework continues to be used in assessing various approaches to business ethics (e.g., Weismann, 2009; Bergsteiner and Avery, 2012; Francés-Gómez et al., 2015; Santos and Laczniak, 2015).

For the purposes of my discussion of CBE, I focus in particular on (3), the proposed decision principle suggested by the theory. Bishop notes that the decision principle “is vital to the definition of any normative theory, and, of course, vital if the theory is to be practically applied. A normative theory of business ethics would be useless if it did not specify how

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<sup>4</sup> Bishop’s framework plays an important foundational role for my argument. For those that may be immediately concerned about its use here, I want to flag that I consider some potential objections to this framework’s applicability to character-based business ethics in Section VII(a).

<sup>5</sup> Bishop (2000:564).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

business people ought to act in various circumstances.”<sup>7</sup> The decision principle should provide adequate action guidance. I argue that the decision principle of CBE is largely dependent on the development of particular character traits, whose potential development is problematic, given the empirical evidence. The importance of adequate decision procedures is shared by managerial scholars as well, as they focus on “how ethical systems come to bear on concrete practices of managing and decision making.”<sup>8</sup> In comprehensive evaluations of the effectiveness of various organizations’ ethical codes, the primary metrics by which these codes of ethics were evaluated were officially reported ethical wrongdoings and perceived ethical wrongdoings.<sup>9</sup> For the business ethicist, how to apply the theory in practical circumstances is important, though it is admittedly just one of many aspects of what is to be expected from a normative business ethical theory.<sup>10</sup> While CBE may be able to adequately address the other elements of the framework, its deficiency with respect to (3) should cast serious doubt on CBE viability as a normative business ethics theory.

### **III. Character-Based Business Ethics**

#### ***a. What is CBE?***

Proponents of CBE do not simply stress the importance of virtues in a business context. Traditional theories of virtue ethics are meant to apply to many aspects of one’s life, including work. Importantly though, there are aspects of CBE that distinguish it from merely being an application of a general virtue ethical theory. Such features include the purported practical advantage of identifying character traits versus the identification of abstract guiding principles for ethics education (Hartman, 2006, 2008; Melé, 2009), and strategies for developing particular

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<sup>7</sup> Bishop (2000:565).

<sup>8</sup> Clegg et al. (2007:118).

<sup>9</sup> Somers (2001).

<sup>10</sup> See Monast (1994) for discussions regarding the balance of purely theoretical concerns and practical applications.

traits and behavioral patterns in a corporation (Warren and Smith-Crowe, 2008). Other approaches to CBE articulate strategies for promoting virtues as a safeguard against the type of global economic crises experienced in 2007-2008.<sup>11</sup> According to this view, a global capitalist system requires its actors to possess the appropriate types of virtues to ensure virtuous behavior, but at the same time, such a system “depletes” such virtues from individuals. The development of particular virtues has also been offered as a guide toward more ethical consumption of resources.<sup>12</sup>

The general framework of CBE is said to be similar to many traditional versions of virtue ethics (Solomon, 1992). For instance, the virtues identified for CBE are certainly not alien to the broader tradition of virtue ethics. Those virtues include loyalty, dependability, and integrity.<sup>13</sup> Integrity in particular plays a crucial role in the normative framework of CBE.<sup>14</sup> An agent with integrity is, in part, a unified or whole individual. In a business setting, Solomon notes that, “A person’s integrity on the job typically requires him or her to follow the rules and practices that define that job, rather than allow oneself to be swayed by distractions and contrary temptations.”<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that integrity disposes one to behave in accordance with particular rules, but rather it indicates that the person is sensitive to the particular rules and regulations of their business, and insofar as they are not morally problematic, respects the role of those rules in the business setting.

### ***b. The Character and Action Guidance in CBE***

In section II, I claimed that the deficiency of CBE as a theory of business ethics is due to its failure to fulfill the one of the important frameworks of business ethical theory identified by

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<sup>11</sup> Moore (2012).

<sup>12</sup> Gracia-Ruiz (2014).

<sup>13</sup> Solomon (1992:326).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

Bishop (2000). Bishop argues that a theory of business ethics should provide action guidance since, “A normative theory of business ethics would be useless if it did not specify how business people ought to act in various circumstances.”<sup>16</sup> As I go on to argue, the failure of CBE to provide adequate action guidance is not due to a structural problem with CBE. The failure is due instead to empirical evidence undermining the reasonableness of what I take action guidance for CBE to be.

As stated earlier, one of the goals of CBE is the development of particular virtues. For CBE, virtues (e.g., integrity) will help the agent determine the best course of action. Importantly, these virtues are not behavioral dispositions to perform certain preordained ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ actions. For many virtue ethicists, including proponents of CBE, right action is realized through acting from a virtuous character. Hursthouse (1999:28) defines right action for the virtue ethicist in the following way: “An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e., acting in character) do in the circumstances.”<sup>17</sup> While at first glance this may seem uninformative, it indicates important commitments of virtue ethics.<sup>18</sup> Acting as the virtuous agent would be sensitive to particular types of reasons in an appropriate way. That is, to possess virtue, and to exercise it properly. While there is variation in the virtue ethics literature, there is much to agree on. Annas (2005:642) notes, “Virtue is a disposition to act on reasons,” and Russell (2009:344) as well writes, “Acting from or exercising a virtue is one kind of acting for a reason.” Swanton (2001:38) describes virtue as, “a good quality or excellence of character. It is a disposition of acknowledging or responding to items in the field of a virtue in an excellent (or good enough) way.” A full conception virtue encompasses much more than sensitivity to

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<sup>16</sup> Bishop (2000:565).

<sup>17</sup> There are variations throughout the virtue ethics literature as to what constitutes right action, but connection to the character of the virtuous agent remains. For other account see, for example, Tiberius (2006), Russell (2009) and van Zyl (2011).

<sup>18</sup> Hursthouse (1999:31-34) addresses this charge of uninformatiens.

particular reasons for action of course, as it also includes emotional responses, motivations, and desires, to name only a few.<sup>19</sup> All of this, of course, is perfectly compatible with a character based approach to business ethics. But as a theory of business ethics, it is fair to question what exactly action guidance could be for this character-based approach if sensitivity to reasons in a characteristically virtuous way is what constitutes right action.

Given something like Hursthouse's understanding of right action of virtue ethics, one might think the action guidance being to simply do as the virtuous agent would do. Hursthouse herself, though, resists this kind of interpretation. She argues against the codifiability of virtue ethics, and specifically rejects the notion of a specific action procedure being derivable from virtue ethics that someone could just follow.<sup>20</sup> Hursthouse maintains that one needs to exercise virtuous faculties in order to actually do as the virtuous person would. She claims it is a mistake to say something like "The virtuous agent never does what is wrong" since this presupposes a prior identification of wrong action.<sup>21</sup> Without the character or virtue of the virtuous agent, one cannot act as the virtuous agent would in the circumstances. The actions must stem from a settled state of character, not merely mimicking the action the virtuous agent would take.

My contention that CBE fails to provide adequate action guidance, however, does not rest on Hursthouse's rejection of the codifiability of virtue ethics. In principle, this is not a problem for CBE. At least one form of action guidance is available for CBE without undermining the notion of right action consistent with something like Hursthouse's account. Generally speaking, action guidance could be understood as, first, making sure virtues important to CBE are developed in the relevant people. Action could be correctly guided by people acting from their virtuous character which would just be the doing as the virtuous agent would do,

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<sup>19</sup> Nussbaum (1999:170).

<sup>20</sup> Hursthouse (1999:39-42, 56-58).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

characteristically, in the circumstances. This is admittedly a little quick, but I think it's fair to say this could serve as the basis for CBE action guidance, given the importance of virtue possession for right action.

It is worth noting that Bishop's framework does allow for some alteration from the general normative theory to the normative business ethical theory. Bishop writes, "the decision principle of a normative theory of business ethics need not be the same as the fundamental moral principle."<sup>22</sup> For example, a utilitarian maximization principle might only be applied to big picture company policies, rather than every single decision made on a daily basis. What this might look like for CBE is unclear, and would need to be developed in future research. Certainly, the actual institutionalization of virtue into people is cited as one of important goals of CBE.<sup>23</sup> And it is precisely the commitment to the actual development of virtues which results in a greater vulnerability of CBE to situationist worries.

A call for codifiability is not a new challenge for virtue ethics. During much of its contemporary development, proponents of virtue ethics have objected to the notion that a "proper" ethical theory has clearly defined rules.<sup>24</sup> The objections to codifiability are interesting ones, but a direct objection to codifiability is to reject the evaluative framework of Bishop (2000). But the prospect of codifiability for virtue ethics is not always completely dismissed. Hursthouse, while maintaining that right action must come from a virtuous character, comments that it is not as though right action is always complete mystery to the non-virtuous. It's commonly accepted that the honest person, for example, is quick to correct false impressions, and makes sure a potential partner in a contract is aware of and understands what they are

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<sup>22</sup> Bishop (2000:567).

<sup>23</sup> Moore (2012:293).

<sup>24</sup> E.g., McDowell (1979:336).

agreeing to.<sup>25</sup> For a particular class of moral cases, what the virtuous person would characteristically do is not difficult to guess. As a result, Hursthouse claims virtue ethics has sufficient codification for the clear and unproblematic cases. She goes on to say, however, that any codification breaks down when cases get more challenging, as in *how* honest one should be in various circumstances, or exactly *when* it might be better to break a long held promise. In these hard cases, codification becomes unreasonable. In the challenging cases, one needs judgment and moral wisdom of the virtuous agent in order to act rightly.<sup>26</sup> Challenging cases though are where a manager might need the most guidance. My critique of a CBE decision principle could be limited to the class of more challenging cases.<sup>27</sup> Even granting that my criticism of CBE only applies when the theory is to be action guiding in very difficult circumstances is still a serious problem for CBE. A normative theory that has the least to say when it is needed the most is problematic at best.

#### **IV. CBE & Situationism**

Situationism does not threaten all forms of virtue ethics, and so likewise not all versions of CBE.<sup>28</sup> The primary target of situationism has been the contemporary tradition of virtue ethics.<sup>29</sup> Situationists argue that the virtue ethical understanding of character -- consisting in *global* traits effecting cross-situationally consistent and stable behavior -- is undermined by a large body of findings from social psychology. The general situationist argument against ethical theories committed to global traits is best understood as follows:<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Hursthouse (1999:11).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-62.

<sup>27</sup> Though from the representative sample of studies I examine in Section V, problematic situational influence appears to occur for what should be the “clear” kinds of cases as well.

<sup>28</sup> In particular, many instrumentalist approaches to Virtue Ethics appear well equipped to handle situationist arguments. For examples of instrumentalist views, see Driver (2001) and Besser-Jones (2014).

<sup>29</sup> Anscombe (1958) is usually regarded the rallying call of this tradition.

<sup>30</sup> Merritt et al. (2010).



(1) If systematic (e.g., scientific) observation reveals pervasive behavioral inconsistency, then behavior is not typically governed by global traits.

(2) Systematic observation reveals pervasive behavioral inconsistency.

*Therefore,*

(3) Behavior is not typically governed by global traits.

Put simply, the skeptical claim by situationists is that people don't often behave as consistently as familiar theories of character would have us expect, which is supposed to imply that global traits are not widely instantiated in actual human populations.<sup>31 32</sup>

A trait is *global* if it produces consistent and stable trait-appropriate behavior.<sup>33</sup>

Consistency is a matter of trait-appropriate behavior reliably manifesting across a wide variety of trait-appropriate situations. Sara is consistently honest because she performs the relevant honesty-appropriate behavior in most or all aspects of her life. That is, she is honest at home, at work, when she is with friends, and when she is traveling, to name only a few. "Behavior" should be understood quite broadly, encompassing more than just overt bodily movements, as "An honest person will not only be honest in her own actions, she will feel disgusted by dishonesty" (Annas 2011: 67-68). Stability is a matter of trait-appropriate behavior manifesting over time in the same way in similar trait-appropriate situations. Sara's honesty is stable if her

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<sup>31</sup> For some skeptics, this descriptive claim is paired with a normative claim to the effect that general notions of character and virtue predicated on global trait should be eliminated from, or minimized in, ethical thought. I do not consider this much stronger claim by the situationist here.

<sup>32</sup> The issue is sometimes mischaracterized as having to do with whether or not character traits "exist," despite the fact that the participants in the debate, character skeptics included, typically acknowledge that traits of character and personality exist. For more on this discussion, see Merritt et al. (2010).

<sup>33</sup> Parting ways from discussion in earlier chapters, traits are not described as consistent or stable, but rather the behavior that is produced. This is contrary to how traits are described in the character debate, but was altered here to accommodate how such things are discussed in the business ethics literature.

honesty is an enduring feature of her over time.<sup>34</sup> The conception of stability used here is importantly linked to consistency, as stability can also be understood as consistency over time. As a result, much of the debate between situationists and defenders of virtue ethics focuses on consistency. A seemingly lack of behavioral consistency due to certain situational factors is what most of the psychological literature cited by situationists is meant to show.<sup>35</sup> But it is far from obvious how exactly consistency should be construed. Given the preceding discussion of what it is to be virtuous, I think it's fair to characterize consistency in terms of reliable manifestations of behavior (broadly construed) with respect to the presence or absence of certain reasons for actions. The virtuous individual, should respond appropriately to particular reasons for actions across a variety of circumstances where that reason is present.<sup>36</sup> Reasons need not be external objects in the world, but also psychological features of the agent as well. Consider Adams' (2006:182) description of courage where he notes, "Courage is a matter of dealing with fears and dangers, not in just any way that seems good at the time ... [courage] takes adequately into account one's valuation of one's most important aims."

Exactly which particular reasons are most important to CBE, I think, can be set aside. My argument doesn't turn on reasons unique to CBE, and given the types of virtues CBE is concerned with, there is likely a fair amount of crossover with more general normative theories of virtue ethics. What is important is that the language of reason responsiveness can be found in the CBE literature. Part of the stated goals of CBE is to help people "*act* according to their

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<sup>34</sup> "Evaluative integrability" is also cited as a feature of global traits, which implies that possession of certain traits (virtues in particular) is probabilistically related to the possession of similar traits. This feature receives little attention in the debates surrounding situationism, so I leave it aside. See Doris (2002) and Miller (2013;2014) for more on this issue.

<sup>35</sup> Some interpret the psychological literature used in this debate as actually revealing a robust consistency, though not in the ways we expect. See Miller (2013, 2014) for a detailed account of such a view.

<sup>36</sup> The responsiveness need not be absolute. Even a situationist like Doris would be satisfied with a responsiveness at a level "markedly above chance" (Doris 2002: 19). Additionally, there are obviously exceptions where some justified defeater to a particular reason action is present.

commitments and values despite possible short-term pressures and temptations to the contrary.”<sup>37</sup>

The possession those traits identified by proponents of CBE are at times said to be even more important for managers, given their greater responsibilities. Some argue that the “selection of virtuous individuals is certainly to be encouraged the more power a role carries.”<sup>38</sup>

To sum up, the types of traits proponents of CBE are interested in cultivating are those which dispose the possessors to be responsive to particular reasons for action across a wide variety of circumstances. The cultivation of such traits is intended to be the foundation on which good corporate and social policy is to be built.<sup>39</sup> Part of being responsive to the right kinds of reasons is to not be swayed by problematic factors (e.g., morally irrelevant factors or temptations). Such problematic factors should not *regularly* enhance nor inhibit those behaviors associated with the traits. The actual cultivation of these virtues, I’ve argued, is the most obvious way for CBE to address the need for some kind of action guidance that so important to the framework of normative theories of business ethics.

## **V. Situationist Evidence**

The second premise of the general situationist argument from Section III states, “Systematic observation reveals pervasive behavioral inconsistency.” As I mentioned earlier, my reading of ‘behavioral’ in the context of this debate is rather broad, and is not merely overt bodily movements. Cognitions and emotions have a role to play as well. The above premise is an empirical claim, and thus needs empirical evidence. The full collection of the empirical evidence

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<sup>37</sup> Hartman (1998:549).

<sup>38</sup> Sinnicks (2014:237).

<sup>39</sup> Solomon (1992:322-323).

cited by situationists is much too large for a single paper, so I focus here only a representative sample of the relevant studies.<sup>40</sup>

Stanley Milgram's obedience study is one of the most cited studies in debates between situationists and defenders of virtue ethics.<sup>41</sup> The published conclusions reveal that everyday people can be driven to administer seemingly dangerous electric shocks to an innocent person under the gentle urgings of a stern scientist. While some test subjects were described as tense or nervous, they continued to obey. Subjects heard clear protests and screams of the confederate as they administered (or so they thought) increasingly dangerous electric shocks. Some, including Solomon (2002), have interpreted the findings as being indicative of a not-so-surprising general obedience to authority. Additional variations of the experiment, however, cast significant doubt on this interpretation. While the physical presence of the scientist next to the subjects resulted in high levels of obedience, put that scientists on the phone, and obedience plummeted.<sup>42</sup> This calls into question what exactly people are being responsive to, whether they are going along with the experiment or ceasing participation.

In a less dramatic study, researchers found an association between light levels and cheating behavior.<sup>43</sup> Subjects in the study completed a series of anagrams and were allowed to score their own work. Each correct answer earned the subject a cash reward. Inaccurate scoring in favor of earning more money was significantly higher in the room with lower light levels. Cheating also similarly increased for subjects wearing sunglasses.

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<sup>40</sup> For a fuller discussion of the relevant experiments, see Doris (2002), Snow (2010), Alfano (2013), Miller (2013;2014).

<sup>41</sup> Milgram (1963; 371 – 378).

<sup>42</sup> Milgram (1974). Alzola (2012:352) remarks “how remarkable situational differences produced no significant differences in behavior in the Milgram experiment.” This seems incorrect, given that the baseline obedience rate was about 65%, while the obedience rate when orders were given over the phone was about 20%. Though a more significant change in experimental conditions, when subjects were forced to hold the “learner’s” hand on the shocking device, obedience was only about 30%.

<sup>43</sup> Zhong et al. (2010).

Numerous studies have investigated the relation between helping behavior and the number of potential helpers present. In one study, subjects were seated in a room and heard a loud crash and a cry of pain from a neighboring room. Subjects who were alone when they heard the crash were much more likely to get up and investigate than those who were in the room with others. The same kinds of effects have been readily documented in large crowds outside of the laboratory as well, sometimes dubbed the “group effect”. There are multiple theories as to why this occurs, from the idea that large crowds diffuse responsibility, or even the desire to avoid embarrassment of being the only person to offer assistance when none might be needed.<sup>44</sup> What seems to be implied by these cases is that most people are not responsive to what we would expect to be sufficient reason to offer minimal assistance.

From this sampling of studies, the threat of situationism becomes, hopefully, clearer. What is important is not so much the bad behavior on the part of the participants, but rather how minor situational factors can seemingly push people’s behavior around so readily.<sup>45</sup> For many people, whether or not the lights were dimmed a bit significantly impacted their propensity to cheat. Along the same lines, orders to inflict suffering on another human being were followed or not based on those orders coming from someone standing next to them, or over the phone. That people are pushed around so easily by such factors, and so failing to be responsive to clear reasons for action is how I think the situationist best makes their argument.

## **VI. Responses to Situationism**

The general situationist argument I presented is found throughout the relevant literature. Not surprisingly, a great variety of responses have been voiced in defense of virtue ethics. In this section, I consider some of the more prominent responses. I believe these responses in defense of

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<sup>44</sup> For an overview of the group effect literature, see Miller (2013: 143-145). For examples of specific experiments, see Latané and Darley (1970) or Garcia et al. (2002).

<sup>45</sup> See Miller (forthcoming) for a fuller explanation of this important point.

virtue ethics are worth taking seriously, and are deserving of the continuing attention they receive. As I go on to argue in this section though, the use of such responses in the normative business ethics literature is misguided. Given the general evaluative framework of a normative business ethical theory discussed in Section II, in particular the need for action guidance, the most promising responses to situationism fail to defend CBE.

Within the virtue ethics situationist debate, there is a helpful taxonomy of the various responses offered by defenders of virtue ethics, which includes the *Rarity Response* and *counter-attack*.<sup>46</sup>

#### ***a. Rarity Response***

To use the co-called *Rarity Response* is to claim virtue is a rare ideal, so the fact that behavior consistent with global traits (virtuous or otherwise) is rarely (if at all) observed in social psychology experiments should come as no surprise.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, attaining the virtues is a life-long pursuit, requiring great effort and dedication. To take this kind of line is to interpret talk of virtue as a primarily normative discourse; lack of empirical corroboration is largely irrelevant to the theory. Under this interpretation, the discourse of global traits could be thought of as an evaluative discourse, and it can fulfill this role whether or not the psychological structures it presupposes are instantiated in actual human beings. The extent to which this is a perspicuous understanding of important strains in philosophical (and every day) thinking on character, or an independently appealing approach to philosophical ethics, is debatable; certainly, “psychological realism” is often treated as a desideratum for ethical theories in general,<sup>48</sup> and virtue ethical

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<sup>46</sup> Miller (2014:202) and Alfano (2013:62).

<sup>47</sup> E.g., Miller (2003, 2014) and Kamtekar (2004).

<sup>48</sup> e.g., Flanagan (1991).

theories in particular,<sup>49</sup> and it is quite unclear that this is an advantage purely evaluative theories can claim.

While this defense is by no means conclusive, it is certainly available to defenders of virtue ethics to deflect some situationist worries.<sup>50</sup> Some proponents of CBE have made arguments in line with the *Rarity Response*. Solomon notes that experimental results merely remind us of “something we’d rather not remember, that ordinary people sometimes act very badly in group and institutional situations. This should come as no surprise to those of us who do corporate or organizational ethics.”<sup>51</sup> Alzola makes a similar remark, claiming “If virtue requires practical wisdom, one would expect virtuous persons to be rare. *Full possession of a virtue is atypical.*”<sup>52</sup>

There is good reason to think, however, that the *Rarity Response* is not a viable option for proponents of CBE. Recall from Section II, I suggest action guidance for CBE involves the actual development of the relevant virtues. Newton (1992:363), in line with my suggestion, describes one of the first goals of business ethics to be putting “good (virtuous) people in positions of responsibility.” If a proponent of CBE readily takes the rarity response, they are admitting to potential action guidance as something rare, fully available to potentially only a select few. This strikes me as an odd recommendation for a business to implement. Granted, the *Rarity Response* may not necessarily mean the near impossibility of attaining virtue. Instead, the attainment of virtue may be a live possibility, but only after a lifetime of dedication and study. I have similar worries here. Presumably, businesses and managers are concerned with employee behavior in a much shorter time-frame, and so timeline for the practical action guidance should

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<sup>49</sup> e.g., Besser-Jones (2014).

<sup>50</sup> For responses to the *Rarity Response*, see Prinz (2009) and Alfano (2013).

<sup>51</sup> Solomon (2003:48).

<sup>52</sup> Alzola (2012:390), emphasis added.

not be something that takes employee their whole lifetime. While it is certainly not objectionable for an employee to have the noble goal of pursuing a virtuous state of character, a failure of a right action will likely not be excused on the basis of employees only just beginning their path to virtue. People in positions of authority aren't supposed to be works in progress.<sup>53</sup>

To attempt to reconcile situationist evidence with CBE based on the rarity of virtue is to accept an inadequate normative business ethical theory, given the difficulties with realizing a practical action guidance. CBE, as it is often articulated, is meant to be a business-wide recommendation, and not only geared toward a select few. As one proponent of CBE notes, “virtue itself needs to be institutionalized; we need an appropriate governance of virtue in organization.”<sup>54</sup> If virtue is accepted as a rare ideal, it is difficult to see how action guidance would be practically implemented.

### ***b. Counter-attack***

The *counter-attack* is a response to the effect that the types of studies used by situationists against virtue ethics are insufficient to show a lack of virtue. There are at least two ways of understanding this response. One way is to simply reject that the situationist interpretation of the experimental data. To put it concisely, the claim is that data simply doesn't undermine the idea that most people possess some kind of global trait.<sup>55</sup> The other version of this response is to claim that situationists have the wrong conception of virtue.

### ***a. Improper Interpretation of Experimental Data***

Alzola (2012:394) argues that objective behavioral measurements are plainly deficient for establishing whether or not human beings have the kinds of mental states needed for virtue.

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<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Vandekerckhove (2014).

<sup>54</sup> Moore (2012:293).

<sup>55</sup> Miller (2013; 2014) develops an account of “mixed-traits” that he claims are the global traits that situationists are skeptical of, but that are still well-supported by the experiment evidence. To my knowledge, no proponent of CBE has attempted to use Miller's account.



Alzola interprets situationists as claiming that overt behavioral acts are necessary and sufficient for trait ascription.<sup>56</sup> He goes on to argue that this is the wrong conception of virtue since, according to Aristotle, acting in a less-than-perfectly virtuous manner is at times compatible with virtue possession. Solomon (2003:53) complains results from studies like the Milgram experiment should be discounted because of the unusual and contrived nature of the situation. The studies, he argues, aren't testing the right aspects of character, since such situations are so unfamiliar to the agent. If the above criticisms are correct, then evidence offered by the situationist, whether applied to CBE or virtue ethics in general, fails to hit the intended target.

First, I worry about the conception of situationism offered by Alzola (2012). The claim that the situationist understands behavior as both necessary and sufficient for virtue seems inaccurate. Doris (2002:17) describes overt behavior as important for virtue, though readily acknowledging “Virtues are not *mere* dispositions but *intelligent* dispositions, characterized by distinctive patterns of emotional response, deliberation, and decision as well as by more overt behavior.” Additionally, I don't think situationist argument is an inductive argument starting with various individuals failing to possess the right kinds of traits. Indeed, situationists readily admit that direct evidence for or against a particular person's possession of one kind of character trait or another would require long term, systematic observation of that individual.<sup>57</sup> Instead, in interpreting experimental results to support their argument, situationists are best understood as appealing to inference to the best explanation. That the presence or absence of morally irrelevant situational factors appears to push around people's morally relevant behavior is what the situationist highlights. I agree with Alzola and others that the Milgram experiment does not show

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<sup>56</sup> Alzola (2012:387).

<sup>57</sup> Doris (2002:38), original emphasis.

us that most of the subjects were non-virtuous people.<sup>58</sup> There doesn't need to be any particular character judgement about any particular person in the experiment for situationist worries to surface. What we can infer from the results is that people's morally relevant behavior is pushed around by problematic factors. Specifically, most people fail to be consistency responsive to particular reasons for action. Action guidance for CBE would then be highly susceptible to problematic interference. Since action guidance for a normative theory of business ethics is meant for practical implementation, information about situational factors that could easily derail right action seem quite relevant.

### ***b. Wrong Conception of Virtue***

Based on much of the evidence cited, situationists hold overt behavior as crucially important for the evaluation of right action. Some people defend virtue ethics by deemphasizing overt behavior. For example, virtue relevant behavior has been argued to be introspective evaluation of one's own motivations and concerns (Annas, 2003) or the right kind of emotional response (Swanton, 2003). The types of performances related to these conceptions of virtue are not the typical target for study in studies cited by situationists. For example, the fact that many subjects in the original Milgram experiment expressed great anxiety and distress while they continued to "shock" the victim is the right kind of emotional response, and thus might be taken as evidence of a developing virtue (Swanton, 2003). Like the *Rarity Response*, these are not conclusive replies, but they're available for defenders of virtues ethics for responding to situationists. But like the *rarity* response, this response is a poor fit for defenders of CBE.

On its face, this kind of response is problematic for a view concerned with action guidance. CBE is intended to guide people towards right action (i.e., what the virtuous person

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<sup>58</sup> In particular, Alzola (2012:385-386) observes that we could readily confuse the continent person with the virtuous person and the incontinent person with the vicious person, since all we have to go on are their overt behavioral acts.

would characteristically do in the circumstances). And as a normative theory of business ethics, it should provide action guidance that can be applied in various situations. If a proponent of CBE wishes to downplay overt behavioral acts, it's difficult to see what people are being guided towards. For example, merely having certain emotional responses, virtuous though they may be, is insufficient for effective action guidance in a business. One of the expectations of the decision principle is a certain amount of practicality. Recall the description from Bishop (2000) of a normative theory needing to give real direction on what to do.<sup>59</sup> If the action is limited to not include overt behavioral act, this cast serious doubts on its usefulness. While a normative business ethical theory is by no means exhausted by its practical applications, such applications are an important part of the normative business ethics framework.<sup>60</sup> After all, good companies aren't built on good intentions. Certainly, the importance of overt behavior is stressed by proponents of more general theories of virtue ethics. Consider Adams (2006:137): "If [virtues] are to have the excellence that qualifies them as virtues, they should not be impotent in the shaping of behavior ... [virtues] should normally involve behavioral dispositions of some sort." Again, overt behavior does not exhaust virtue, but it is an important component, especially for the role it would play in action guidance. Alzola himself notes "*Normative business ethics* is roughly concerned with theories of how business persons ought to behave and how organizations ought to be governed."<sup>61</sup>

To be clear, I think de-emphasizing overt behavior can still have purchase for the defense of more general virtue ethical theories (pace Adams). One recent suggestion by Murray (2014) is that if a given theory isolates the primary constituents of character from those processes shown to be sensitive to situational influence in problematic ways, then situationist arguments lose

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<sup>59</sup> Bishop (2000:565).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 566-569

<sup>61</sup> Alzola (2010:2), original emphasis.

much of their force.<sup>62</sup> But for the reasons stated above, rejecting studies that only measure overt behavior is a problematic defense of CBE.

## **VII. Potential Defenses of CBE**

One may largely agree with what I've had to say so far, yet claim that my strategy cuts both ways. While traditional defenses of virtue ethics may not work for CBE, perhaps the framework of normative business ethics results in situationist argument being deflected in other ways. In this section, I consider some potential defenses of CBE in light of my criticism, and some replies to those defenses.

### ***a. The Normative Framework of Business Ethics***

Much of my argument depends on the requirement, following Bishop (2000), that a normative theory of business ethics provide action guidance that could be practically implemented in a business. I've assumed action guidance for CBE is structured around the actual instantiation of the relevant virtues in people within the business, which in turn makes the problems posed by situationism more acute for CBE. There are at least two ways to respond to point this. The first is to simply reject Bishop's framework. Second, that requiring specific action guidance, or some manner of codifiability, is an improper requirement for a normative theory in the virtue ethics tradition.<sup>63</sup>

Rejection of Bishop's framework would undoubtedly undercut my argument, but such a rejection puts one at odds with others in the business ethics tradition who continue to use this framework as well. Weismann (2009) cites the elements of the framework in their argument for the failure of the self-regulatory model of corporate behavior. Bishop's argument for stakeholder

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<sup>62</sup> Murray (2014: 714). Or at the very least, as Murray goes on to say, those processes which might develop or at least figure heavily into the constituents parts of virtue.

<sup>63</sup> Along similar lines, one could object to the definition of business ethics provided by Lewis (1985) mentioned in Section II.

theory, which was first advanced using his framework, continues to be cited in the relevant literature.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Bergsteiner and Avery (2012:400), in their critique of shareholder theory, cite Bishop's arguments against that theory as well. Not surprisingly, Bishop's arguments against shareholder theory depend on his own framework of evaluation. Many other strands of business ethics continue to depend on Bishop's framework.<sup>65</sup> Whatever one may think of stakeholder theory, shareholder theory, and the various other areas where Bishop's framework has been applied, my point here is that Bishop's framework has a solid place within the field of normative business ethics. This does not mean, of course, that one must accept Bishop (2000) without complaint. I do, however, think the burden of proof is on those that wish to reject an established way of evaluating normative theories of business ethics if they wish to drop the framework in the case of CBE.

As I mentioned earlier though, one may think that Bishop's framework is an unsuitable evaluative tool for CBE, though still maintain its general applicability in other aspects of business ethics. Indeed, proponents of virtue ethics have at times resisted codifiability in general.<sup>66</sup> Even if it is not a wholesale rejection of Bishop's framework, I still think someone that would object along these lines owes an account of why CBE is the exception to an established evaluative framework for the very type of theory CBE is purported to be. Besides this, someone taking this kind of line would need to explain how it is a normative theory of business ethics is not to be held accountable for providing actual, practical guidance for people in the business world. I do not mean to make the much stronger claim made by some that normative business ethics should not deal in the abstract theory or difficult concepts that might not always have a

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<sup>64</sup> Onika (2009:286). Onika cites Jones and Wicks (1999) as well.

<sup>65</sup> E.g., Santos and Laczniak (2015) and Francés-Gómez et al. (2015). Bishop himself continues rely on his earlier work as well as recently as in Bishop (2008).

<sup>66</sup> E.g., McDowell (1979:336).

clear, practical offshoot. But at some point, and there seems to be a fair amount of agreement in the literature on this, a theory needs to offer practical solutions for the real world.<sup>67</sup>

### ***b. Teaching virtue***

Some have argued that, rather than being a problem for CBE, studies cited by situationists can actually be used to help develop people's character. For example, studying the results of the Milgram experiment can help employees avoid Milgram-like business scenarios, viz., developing techniques to resist performing unethical actions despite the prompting of an authority figure. (Hartman, 2008). The suggestion of habituating oneself to virtuous responsiveness goes all the way back to Aristotle.

There are, however, I think some problems with this kind of response. The first is that, at best, such a strategy could only be effective for *known* situational factors.<sup>68</sup> If there is one lesson from the debate between situationists and defenders of virtue ethics, it's that people's behavior is significantly affected by surprising situational features.<sup>69</sup> Employees and managers will not be inoculated against those factors that the training doesn't prepare them for (e.g., knowing about Milgram-like situations, but being ignorant of the impact of lower light levels on cheating behavior in various situations). Training to be mindful of potentially problematic situational factors is even more difficult in cases where those situational factors are very subtle or below the level of conscious awareness. Research in automaticity is the result of several processes we are unaware of that function below the level of conscious awareness.

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<sup>67</sup> For further discussion on these points, see Andrew Stark's (1993) initial critic of business ethics as much too abstract to be useful, and the many responses to it, such as Monast (1994) and Hasnas (1998). These responses acknowledge the practical importance of business ethics, but make it quite clear abstract theorizing plays a critical role for the continued development of business ethics.

<sup>68</sup> See Miller (2014:236-237).

<sup>69</sup> Miller (forthcoming).

One of many interesting results from automaticity research is that the location where one votes impacts the types of social policies one casts a vote for. Voting in a school, as opposed to a neutral location like a post office or town hall building, increases the likelihood that people support a sales tax increase for education funding.<sup>70</sup> Several subsequent reviews of automaticity studies have supported other so-called priming effects, like racial stereotype priming being linked to increased aggression.<sup>71</sup> This is only a sampling of the priming studies that are potentially relevant to debates about character and virtue. If the impact of such factors routinely occur below the level of conscious awareness, self-monitoring would be very difficult,

The second major problem with this type of ethics training is its relation to the development of virtue. If employees' virtuous behavior depends on recall of experimental results, it is not obvious that this is evidence of trait development in that employee. Avoiding a situation because of fear of situational influence seems to be a long way from responsive to the right kinds of reasons. It could be argued that recall of the relevant experiment results is an aid for identifying what are and what are not the relevant factors and considerations for a situation. But needing an extra aid or avoiding a specific situation because of morally hazardous situational influences is to acknowledge being *unable* to respond the right kinds of reasons required for virtuous behavior.<sup>72</sup> This not to downplay the strategy in principle of course, viz., it is certainly rational to avoid those situations known to not be conducive to making good decisions. The point is though that in these cases I am acknowledging my inability to respond properly to situational factors. Solomon notes that one of the main goals and advantages of CBE is cultivating character as a "personal bulwark (call it 'integrity') against ... pressures and

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<sup>70</sup> Wheeler & Petty (2001) and Wheeler & DeMarree (2009).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> My thanks to Christian Miller for highlighting this point.

rationalizations.”<sup>73</sup> Simple recall of potentially problematic factors is hardly much of a personal bulwark.

Even if there is some promise to ethics education that encourages avoiding situations that lead to morally problematic behavior, which situationists at times suggest (e.g, Merritt, 2000; Doris, 2002:147), such a strategy would likely not always be an option for large number of employees. There is a general problem, identified by Alfano (2013) that many of the situational factors to be avoided are factors one has little control over, like smells and noises. To make matters worse for proponents of CBE, employees often have limited control over their immediate situations. This is especially true in the cases of subordinates following their superior’s instructions. Because of this, not only is CBE threatened by situationist arguments, but it may indicate a need for expanded managerial responsibility. Since managers are often responsible for the situations employees find themselves in, managers may need to be held more accountable for employee’s bad acts that were heavily influenced by certain situational factors.

### *c. Narrow Virtues for Narrow Situations*

Early in the debate between situationists and defenders of virtue ethics, Doris (2002) offered an alternative conception of traits to replace the traditional global traits he argues against. This has come to be known as a narrow or local trait view.<sup>74</sup> So while traits such as *courage* or *honesty*, or really any kind of global trait, are not widely instantiated in the population, something like *courage-in-the-workplace* or *honesty-at-parties* might be more empirically viable. For a general theory of virtue ethics, such narrow traits are a departure from traditional conceptions of global traits. For business ethics, however, perhaps this option is more viable. Although I imagine most businesses would prefer their employees perform right actions even

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<sup>73</sup> Solomon (2003:57).

<sup>74</sup> Upton (2009) also argues for a more narrow conception of traits.



when they're off the clock, the framework I've been evaluating CBE by has no such requirement. So the response might go, by their own arguments, situationists offer CBE a defense against just the kind of criticism that I am raising. Namely that CBE need focus only on the development of the types of narrow traits argued for by situationists in the first place, like *honesty-in-the-workplace* and *integrity-in-the-workplace*. Indeed, perhaps CBE requires a much weaker form of consistency, since the pool of situations is limited to work-relevant ones.<sup>75</sup>

There are a few things to be said in reply here. First, my endorsement of the situationist argument against global traits in the context of business ethics does not commit me to any positive conceptions of traits offered by situationists. And while it might initially seem promising to focus on a more narrow set of situation-specific traits, the growing body of psychological evidence undermines even these more empirically modest local traits. The factors that significantly push around people's behavior are not always general environmental contexts, such as an office, public mall, or classroom. Instead, time and time again, factors like guilt, embarrassment, anger, fear of blame, and the presence or absence of other people lead to surprising behaviors.<sup>76</sup> If these factors are what significantly, and often problematically, push around our behavior, there just isn't a general environmental context, like workplace, that will secure some limited form of consistency.<sup>77</sup> It's hard to believe the factors mentioned above would be much more consistent in a workplace than they would be otherwise. The lack of consistency that perhaps first inspired the narrow trait view in the first place may go much deeper than first imagined. Even when restricted to business hours, the prospects for consistency appear no less grim. The evidence used by situationists appears to undermine the narrow traits

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<sup>75</sup> Alzola (2012:396) appears to suggest such a move, not just for business ethics, but that virtue ethics proper might be built upon more narrow traits.

<sup>76</sup> See Miller (2013: 241-285) for a thorough investigation of the complex mixture of different factors which can impact our behavior.

<sup>77</sup> Miller (2013:200; forthcoming).

that were offered as a replacement for global traits. Accordingly, a move to narrow traits for action guidance is hardly a viable alternative for CBE.

### **VIII. Concluding Thoughts**

The debate between defenders of virtue ethics and situationists is far from settled, as philosophers on both sides of the debate continue to develop new arguments. However, it appears that CBE is particularly susceptible to situationist worries. And unfortunately for those that argue for CBE, many of the more recent replies to situationism by defenders of virtue ethics are not as appropriate for a normative theory of business ethics. Because of this, developing a viable version of CBE has some additional challenges. Proponents of CBE need to provide novel responses to situationist challenges appropriate to a business ethics context. I've mentioned a few ways in which CBE might better meet the situationist challenge. In particular, if the general normative framework for a theory of business ethics is to remain intact, development of more concrete action guidance is needed. The actual instantiation of a particular kind of character, consisting in *global* traits, may need to be abandoned.

I hardly wish to characterize a character-based approach to normative business ethics as a lost cause. There are innovative approaches to virtue ethics that fair far better in the face of situationist arguments. So-called *instrumentalist* approaches to virtue, while still maintaining the importance of a realistic moral psychology, are not committed to the global trait view so common in the virtue ethics literature. For instrumentalist views, there is no intrinsic value to any particular state of character. A state of character is valuable insofar as it is instrumentally valuable in bringing about particular states of affairs. Some instrumentalist views focus on traits which produce the best consequences, while others focus on the psychological well-being of the

agent themselves.<sup>78</sup> There's no reason to think an instrumentalist approach to virtue couldn't work as the foundation for a normative theory of business ethics. Conceptions of virtue in instrumentalist theories are not as susceptible to situationist worries, and thus action guidance built around instrumental states of character does not necessarily face the problems I've discussed here. Given the importance of a clear and applicable action guidance to a normative theory of business ethics, I believe it crucial that proponents of CBE to revise their respective theories, lest they remain highly susceptible to situationist arguments.

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<sup>78</sup> See Driver (2001) for a view focused on producing good consequences, and Besser-Jones (2014) for a view centered on producing psychological well-being.

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