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Situationism, Honesty, and the Folk

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INTRODUCTION

- The purpose of this research is to find a commonly held folk theory of honesty.
- Our goal is to use this folk theory in order to to construct an accurate account of the philosophical nature of honesty as a character trait.
- Our motivation is to discover a solid case for the existence of character traits that can be used against the recent situationist attacks being seen in psychology.

BACKGROUND

Situationism

- Proponents of situationism reject the assumption that broad character traits drive human behaviour, arguing instead that behaviour is driven purely by situational factors.
  - **Takeaway: Humans either possess no character traits, or (if they exist at all) traits are insignificant and do not influence human action.**
- To this end, situationists refer to a 1928 study done by Hartshorne and May which tested behaviours related to honesty. The results suggest that elements of honest behaviour are not stable, or consistent, across similar situations.
  - **Takeaway: The trait of honesty (if existent) does not possess the stability to reliably influence human behaviour. Thus, situational pressures are better predictors of human behaviour than are traits.**

Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

- The moral theory of virtue ethics requires that humans possess robust character traits that affect our behaviours in situations, especially our moral decisions in moral situations.
  - **Takeaway: Virtue Ethics *requires* that humans possess human traits in order to explain our moral behaviour.**
- It is intuitively plausible that people possessing the trait of honesty would act honestly across a variety of situations, regardless of external pressures.
  - **Takeaway: Our moral intuitions speak against situationism.**

Possible Explanation

- If research subjects construe the situation differently from each other and from the experimenters conceptual framework, then we may expect to see instability of traits across situations. This hypothesis that this could be a potential case of subjective misconstrual motivates our research into a folk theory of honesty.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What do the folk consider to be crucial for honesty and dishonesty?

2. How can we best translate this into a full theory about honesty?

MEASURES

- Results have been coded for the positive and negative presence of eight central thematic elements:
- **[REC]** Recognizing Applicability - Codes when a subject understands that the situation presented warrants an act of honesty.
- **[ALT]** Altruism – Codes for situations involving benefit to others and costs to self
- **[RAR]** Rarity – Codes for responses that describe honesty as uncommon
- **[TRU]** Truthfulness – Codes for situations that involve explicitly telling the truth or failing to tell the truth/telling a lie
- **[PROP]** Property - Codes a response that relies on actions concerning property as indications of honesty or dishonesty.
- **[RESP]** Taking Responsibility – Codes for a subject directly taking responsibility for their actions
- **[MOT]** Motive – Codes for the presence of emotional factors or incentives driving action
- **[CON]** Contract – Codes for the intentional breach of an obligation

This interdisciplinary project uniquely utilizes a single empirical project to motivate two different conceptual projects. For more information, please see the related philosophy poster describing the details of the research program and the psychology poster detailing how this research motivates theories of personality.

RESULTS

Percent Occurance of Thematic Elements by Question

Code: Question:	REC	ALT	RAR	TRU	PROP	RESP	MOT	CON
Q1 (H)	60%	57.5%	12.5%	52.5%	57.5%	25%	20%	27.5%
Q2 (H)	42.5%	20%	10%	45%	30%	42.5%	15%	5%
Q3 (D)	57.5%	45%	12.5%	62.5%	32.5%	50%	62.5%	32.5%
Q4 (D)	5%	0%	0%	55%	25%	10%	35%	30%

*Inter-rater reliability: Kapppa scores by question: Q1=0.39, Q2=0.31, Q3=0.52, Q4=0.41

Honesty

- Honest situations were most frequently described as involving recognition of applicability, displaying altruism, truthfulness, and involving personal property.
- Honest descriptions most frequently involved recognizing applicability, truthfulness, and taking responsibility.
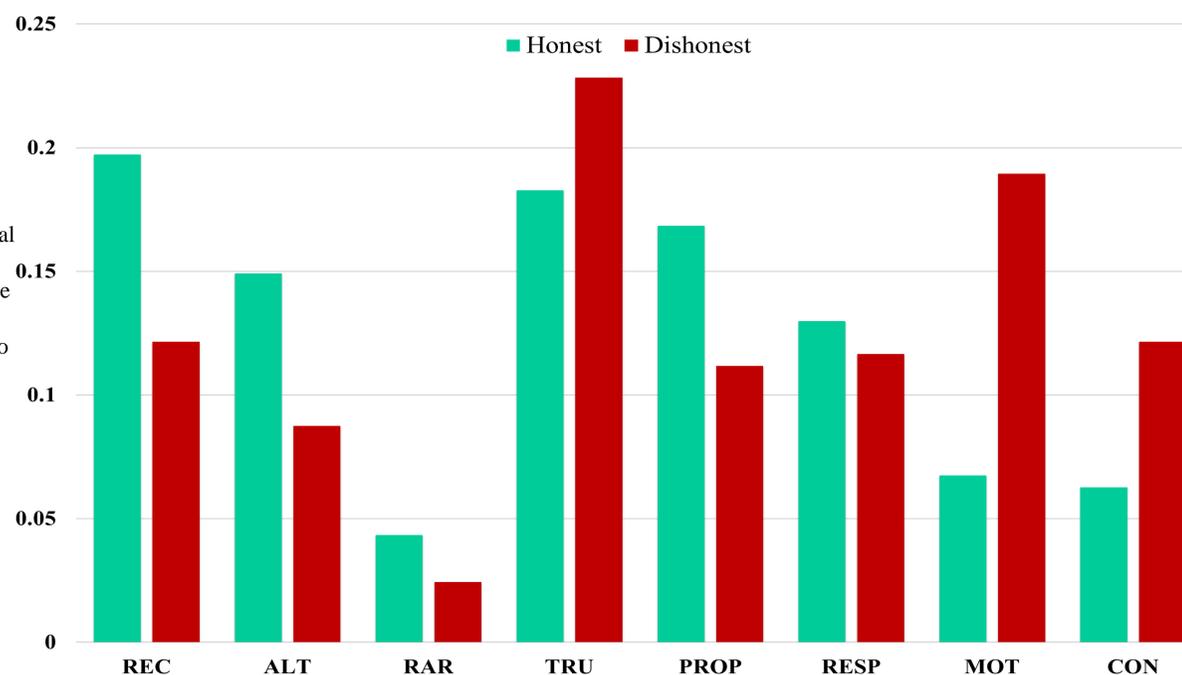
Dishonesty

- Dishonest situations most prominently involve recognition of applicability, a lack of altruism, a lack of truthfulness, failing to take responsibility, and prominent motives.
- Dishonest descriptions most prominently involved the theme of truthfulness, and also included mentions of motives and contracts.

Comparison

- Truthfulness is prominent in responses about both honesty and dishonesty.
- Motives, contracts, and truthfulness are considerably more important to repsonses about dishonesty.
- Recognizing applicability, altruism, and situations involving property are considerably more important in the results about honesty.

Relative Frequency of Thematic Elements

DISCUSSION

- Progress has been made toward discovering a general account of honesty through a number of observations:
  - Honesty and dishonesty are not straightforwardly opposite, as is shown through the frequency distribution of codes, for example, see motives
  - There is a significant difference in distribution between objective descriptions of honesty (Q1) and accounts given about why an honest action qualifies as being honest (Q2), for example, see altruism and responsibility.
  - We are not yet in the position to construct a general definition of honesty which can be reliably tested.
- Next steps
  - Complete the coding through two phases: (1) review the current codebook and (2) code additional responses.
    - Apply sub-codes to responses
  - Raise inter-rater reliability
  - Develop a definition of honesty
  - Test definition.

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