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Are Virtue Ethics and Situationism Really Incompatible?

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ABSTRACT

The compelling empirical support for situationism has caused many to question whether there is such a thing as character, or if it simply a misattribution. In what follows, the author explores the nature of character traits and outlines the case in favor of situationism. The author then argues that character traits are more complex than either virtue ethics or situationism has supposed, and outlines a model of character traits based on counterfactual theories of dispositions. Moreover, while situationism is quite damaging for the strong conceptions of character and agency held by Aristotelian virtue ethics, a more modest notion of character traits survives the situationist challenge and has a promising potential to deliver desirable results in behavior and deliberation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In his book *Experiments in Ethics*, Kwame Anthony Appiah proposes that trying to separate philosophy from psychology is "like trying to peel a raspberry" (Appiah 2009, 14). The truth that Appiah drives home in this analogy is that both disciplines are ultimately concerned with understanding the human condition: why we are the way we are, why we do the things we do, and how we can do better. Virtue ethics addresses these issues in terms of personal character; specifically, it recommends the acquisition and development of stable and virtuous character traits.[1] The situationist movement in social psychology, however, presents serious challenges to this traditional way of thinking, beginning by questioning the assumption that what we *do* has anything at all to do with who we *are*. Situationism contends, as its name suggests, that behavior is primarily determined by situational factors, not virtues or vices of character. This hypothesis is underpinned by a host of experimental data, which suggests that even minute changes in subtle, seemingly insignificant situational variables can lead to predictable, large-scale changes in subjects' behavior. The compelling empirical support for situationism has caused many to question whether there is such a thing as character, or if it simply a misattribution: a useful, but mistaken way of thinking and talking about human behavior (Doris 1998, 507). If anything, situationists claim, information about situational factors should prove much more useful in predicting behavior than information about character (Kamtekar 2004, 458).

In what follows, I explore what exactly a character trait is. I outline the major themes of situationism, as well as some of the reasons for thinking that situationism might be true. I then argue that situationism doesn't tell the full story. More specifically, I suggest that the type of character that situationism renders impossible is a naive, even ridiculous picture of what character is. Character dispositions, I contend, are more complex than either traditional virtue ethics or situationism have supposed, and so neither model has given us a good idea of what the instrumental role of character in behavior really looks like. I conclude that while experimental evidence is quite damaging for the strong notions of character and agency held by Aristotelian virtue ethics, concluding from this that character

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1. In keeping with the convention established by previous literature on the character-situationism debate, I will use the terms 'character trait', 'virtue', 'virtuous disposition', 'personal disposition' and 'character disposition' interchangeably, and they should thus be taken by the reader to mean the same thing.

is either impotent or nonexistent is a fallacious inference. Finally, I suggest a way in which character can, in some cases, be strengthened to resist situational factors.

2. DISPOSITIONS AND SITUATIONS

Most of us assume that we each have a set of attributes, having to do with our moral psychology and behavioral choices, which collectively make up our character. This set of moral attributes might include qualities like honesty, care, helpfulness, or integrity: things we refer to individually as character traits. Generally, character traits are conceived of as personal dispositions towards specific behaviors or types of behaviors—so understanding what dispositions are and how they might work will help us to better understand what character traits are and how *they* might work, and ultimately, to determine whether or not virtue ethics is a plausible way of thinking about behavior and personality.

A disposition is a property possessed by someone or something such that he, she, or it exhibits a certain behavior in response to certain conditions, generally referred to as its *manifestational behavior* and *manifestation conditions*, respectively. The relationship between the manifestation conditions and manifestational behavior is usually expressed in the form of a counterfactual, or subjunctive conditional: if the manifestation conditions were to obtain, the manifestational behavior would occur. A very simple example is the tendency of ice to melt in temperatures above 0°C: melting is the manifestational behavior, and any temperature above 0°C is the manifestation condition.[2]

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2. It is important to note that this formulation posits dispositions as actual properties regardless of whether or not their manifestations are actualized; the existence of a disposition presupposes no actual instances of itself. To this effect, C.B. Martin stipulates that "it is an elementary confusion to think of unmanifesting dispositions as unactualized *possibilia*, though that may characterize unmanifested manifestations." (Martin 1994, 1).
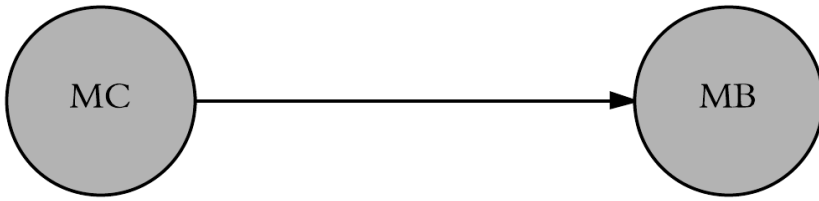
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FIG. 1: A SIMPLE COUNTERFACTUAL

In particular, there are two distinct kinds of manifestation conditions: *enabling* conditions, which put the subject in a state of readiness for the exercise of its manifestational behavior, and *stimulus* conditions, which elicit the behavior itself (Harré and Madden 1975, 88).[3] In order for a disposition's manifestational behavior to occur, its enabling conditions must be met when its stimulus conditions obtain.[4] To illustrate this, imagine a grand piano being lifted off the ground by some absent-minded construction workers. If the workers drop the piano, we would say that it has a disposition to fall. Specifically, the piano has a disposition with the manifestational behavior of falling to the ground, the stimulus condition of being dropped, and enabling conditions that would include things like: positive mass, gravity, unresolved potential energy, etc. If these enabling conditions are met at such a time as the piano is dropped, the piano will fall.[5]

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3. Note that enabling conditions are not necessarily intrinsic, nor are stimulus conditions necessarily extrinsic.

4. In other words, the enabling conditions must be met first, followed by the stimulus conditions.

5. While it is true that objects will exhibit MB once MC is satisfied, Harré and Madden add the caveat that, in the case of persons, "will" should be replaced with "can". This distinction, however, has little to no impact on the issues being addressed. The conclusions of this paper remain the same regardless of whether persons are uniquely free agents, as the matters of consideration have not to do with why these conditions obtain, but what happens when they do.
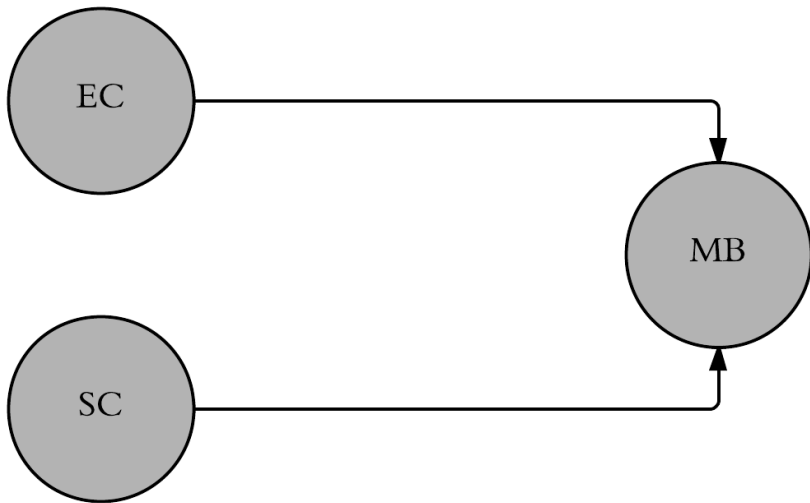
FIG. 2: ENABLING AND STIMULUS CONDITIONS

This same model can be applied to character traits as well. A character disposition, according to the virtue ethics model, is a trait possessed by a person, such that the person would exhibit a specific type of behavior if presented with a specific type of situation. A person possessing a virtuous character trait would accordingly be expected to consistently exhibit the corresponding virtuous behavior in response to virtue-relevant situations (the stimulus conditions), provided that they are in an internal state of readiness to exert the behavior (the enabling conditions). At the very least, as John Doris asserts, they should be expected to exhibit such behavior "with some markedly above chance probability p" (Doris 1998, 509). An honest person, for example, would be expected to exhibit honest behavior across situations relevant to honesty with *at least* an above-average degree of consistence.

Research studies designed to test whether or not human behavior is shaped by these strong, cross-situationally consistent character dispositions, however, have found little to no evidence to suggest that they are present. In fact, these studies seem to suggest quite the opposite: that behavior varies, not with personality or character differences, but with situational differences. One such study found that the degree to which people are willing to go out of their way to help another person can be heavily influenced by something as small as planting a dime for them to find in the coin return of a phone booth (Isen and Levin 1972); another

tested the consistency of honesty exhibited by children across various types of relevant behaviors: specifically, lying, stealing, and cheating (Hartshorne and May 1928). The most famous of these studies is the case of 67 Princeton seminarians, each of whom were directed by experimenters to prepare a sermonette on being a Good Samaritan, then presented with an opportunity to do so themselves. The study found that when these seminarians were told that they were running late on their way to deliver the sermons, the chances of them responding to a situation in which someone needed help were reduced to almost zero (Darley and Batson 1973).

Situationists have concluded from this that, if we do in fact possess personal dispositions like honesty or helpfulness, then they are easily preempted by the effects of situational factors. Specifically, some situational factors appear to disrupt the enabling conditions of our dispositions[6]—that is, our internal readiness to exhibit these behaviors in response to stimuli—and thus prevent the behaviors from occurring (Paul 2009, 168).

To illustrate this, imagine a baseball flying through the air towards a large pane of glass. Assume that if the baseball was allowed to continue on its current path, it would strike the pane of glass, shattering it. Now imagine that you are standing directly between the ball and the pane of glass with a fielder's mitt on. You reach out to make the catch, and, rather than impacting the pane of glass with shattering force, the baseball lands safely in your glove. Since the ball would certainly have struck the glass had you failed,[7] the event of your catch *preempted* the breaking of the glass (Collins 2004, 108). It is in much the same way that situational factors are often able to preempt the obtainment of a personal disposition's enabling conditions. Any one of those Princeton seminarians may well have had a disposition towards helpfulness, but if one of more situational factors were to disrupt their internal readiness to exhibit helpful behavior—that is,

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6. It must be the enabling conditions that are affected by situational factors, as additional aspects of situations would not impact the presence or absence of a choice between two or more courses of action (i.e., the stimulus conditions).

7. The absence of any other potentially preventative factors is critical to the attribution of genuine preemption. Had, for example, someone else been between you and the pane of glass, and had it been the case that if you failed to catch the ball, then they would have successfully caught the ball, then, Collins claims, it is not necessarily the case that your successful catch preempts the breaking of the glass. Rather, it preempts someone else's preemption of the breaking of the glass.

the enabling conditions of the disposition—then it would not manifest in response to appropriate stimulus conditions.
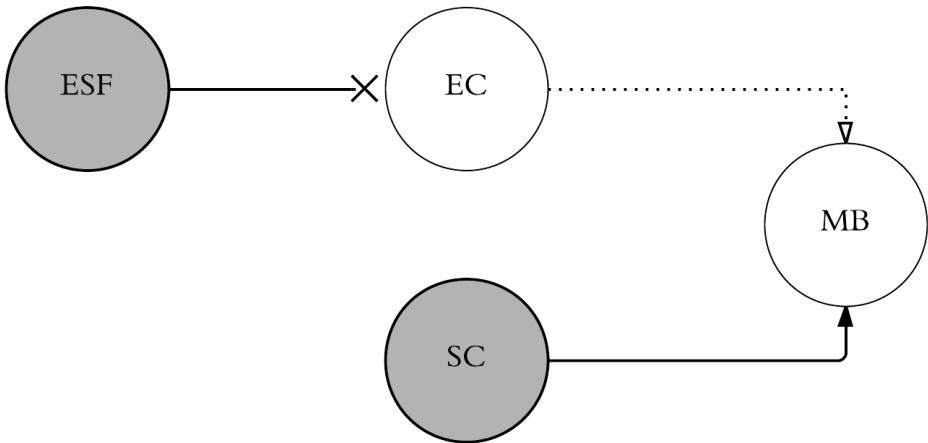

FIG. 3: PREEMPTION BY EFFECTS OF SITUATIONAL FACTORS (ESF)

The important thing to see here is that since we do not seem to have much control over our situations, it stands to reason that we do not have much control over whether or not our dispositions will be triggered. If situational factors are strong enough to preempt our attempts at virtuous behavior, then any success we have in behaving virtuously is actually contingent upon an absence of these factors (Paul 2009, 168).[8] In other words, if a virtuous character trait consistently produces good behavior, it is only because of an equally consistent presence of situations that do not preempt the behavior. Even behaviors that have manifested consistently, not just from person to person, but over time and across cultures, are implicated. It may well be the case that they only occur because they are supported by stable aspects of the sociological environment which ensure that these behaviors will not be preempted. Maria Merritt refers to this stabilizing effect as the *sustaining social contribution to character* (Merritt 2000, 374).[9]

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8. Causation resulting from the absence of a potentially preemptive factor is referred to as negative causation. Paul gives the helpful example of failing to set an alarm negatively causing one to miss class.

9. In this context, broad sociological factors are analogous to situational factors insofar as cultural behavioral trends are analogous to personal behavioral trends. This macro-situationism, so to speak, serves to illustrate the pervasiveness of the sustaining social contribution to virtuous dispositions.
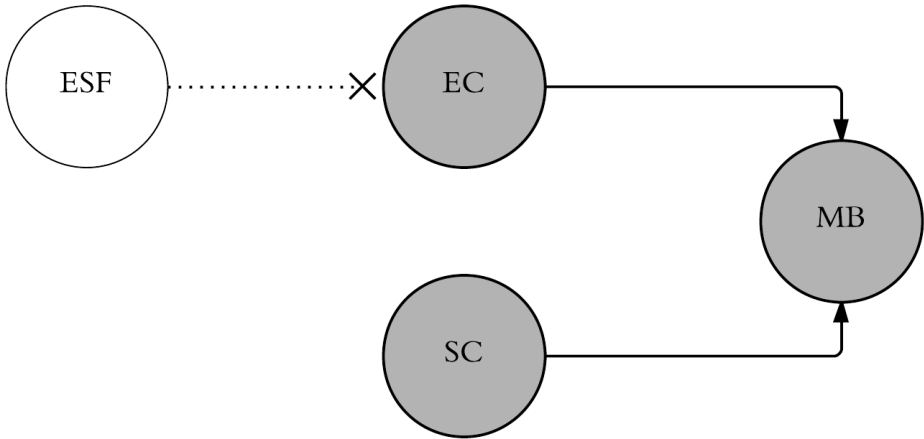
FIG. 4: THE SUSTAINING SOCIAL CONTRIBUTION TO CHARACTER AS NEGATIVE CAUSATION

3. SITUATIONISM'S PROGNOSIS

The fact that behavior seems to vary so strongly with situations has led many social psychologists to believe, as Gilbert Harman does, that "ordinary attributions of character-traits to people may be deeply misguided, and it may even be the case that there is no such thing as character" (Harman 1999, 316). And even if there is such a thing as character, it seems to be nothing we could ever rely on to consistently produce good behavior. If this is the case, then the characterological strategy for promoting good behavior championed by virtue ethics—namely, the creation of robust and stable virtuous traits through willpower and habituation (Aristotle 1962, 1103a)—is simply not a reliable way to ensure virtuous behavior.

Situationists have proposed an alternative to this strategy. Rather than expending our energies on failed attempts to inculcate strong virtues, we should instead focus on learning as much as we can about which situations threaten to preempt the virtuous behaviors we aspire to, and fine-tune our daily lives so as to avoid those situations as much as possible (Doris 1998, 517). Imagine a man named David: a middle-manager at a large firm. His wife is at an out of state conference for the week. Ellen, David's attractive young colleague—whom David knows full is interested in him—invites him to come over to her place after work to watch a movie and share a bottle of expensive wine. David knows that he has a situational weakness to attractive younger women—especially after a few

glasses of wine, and he suspects that his desire to be faithful to his wife might be preempted if he allows himself to do this. David cannot be sure if his virtuous intentions will prevail in such a situation, so he decides to avoid putting himself in it, and politely turns down Ellen's offer. Note that David's approach makes no attempt to rely on the strength of his virtues and willpower to determine behavior, but instead attempts to compensate for his character's vulnerability to situational factors by simply avoiding a situation that might elicit bad behavior. Rather than depending on the fortitude of character to overcome situations and make correct behavioral judgments, this strategy attempts to engineer an environment of situations in which character will not be put to the test.

This deflationary view of our ability to exert willful and rational control over our own actions entails a model of behavior determination that is more or less mechanistic. The degree to which rational agency is attributed to a person's intra-situational willpower in this model is hardly greater than the degree to which rational agency is attributed to, for example, a spring-loaded toy car. Because of its mechanistic qualities, if you wind up a toy car on the floor in the middle of an open area and let go of it, it will immediately unload its potential energy and zip across the floor until it hits something. On the other hand, if you wind the same toy car up, only this time with its front bumper situated up against a wall, it will behave quite differently upon being released. The wheels will spin; it might lose stability and bounce around a couple times before slowing to a stop—but its not getting past that wall. The situationist model supposes that people function in much the same way; each of us exhibits behavior that is in some sense self-propelled, but ultimately dependent on situational context.

There are a number of common objections to the methodology used in situationist research studies.[10] There is the suggestion, for example, that experiments used to evidence the impotence of character traits contain factors that may "rationally override behavior that accords with virtue" (Prinz 2009, 123). For the sake of argument, let's assume that the situationist's critique of robust and stable character traits survives objections of this sort. This model poses significant problems for any ethical theory that recommends, as Aristotelian virtue ethics does, the development of strong, incorruptible character dispositions. It simply would not be possible, because character alone is not sufficient to reliably produce

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10. Jesse Prinz gives a semi-comprehensive overview of these various objections in "The Normativity Challenge: Cultural Psychology Provides the Real Threat to Virtue Ethics" (2009).

behavior: instead, traits must rely on support from the right situational factors. Situationists conclude from this that the ascription of character traits to people are entirely wrong-headed; characterological explanations of behavior, according to John Doris, have been "empirically discredited," and are "inferior to those adduced from experimental social psychology" (Doris 2002, 2-6). Furthermore, Gilbert Harman decries the "deplorable results" of character ethics, which he says lead to "massive misunderstanding of other people," concluding that "there is no empirical support for the existence of character traits" (Harman 1999, 330).

4. SITUATIONISM CRITIQUED

I submit that conclusions like these venture far beyond what can be reasonably inferred from the data. What Doris and Harman fail to realize is that the extent to which we are susceptible to situational influences on our behavior has very little to do with whether or not we each have a set of moral dispositions that might be called character. The idea that character ought to make us impervious to situational influences—a notion that Maria Merritt refers to as the *motivational self-sufficiency of character*[11] (or MSC, for short)—has been thoroughly discredited, but the simple idea that we possess a set of basic moral dispositions has not been damaged. In her discussion of character, Merritt goes on to remark that:

Acknowledging a sustaining social contribution to character has damaging consequences for, at most, conceptions of virtue that include a very strong ideal of MSC. What situationist psychology makes problematic not as such the recommendation to have virtues, but the normative ideal of the virtues as qualities that must be possessed in a strongly self-sufficient form (Merritt 2000, 374-5).

The problem with the assertion that characterological explanations of behavior have been "empirically discredited" is that not all character-based models of behavior include a strong notion of MSC. Furthermore, a theory of character traits that actually *rejects* MSC would not expect dispositions to resist changes in situational factors at all; a model of this type would not be threatened by the situationist's findings—in fact, it would likely have *expected* them, since it conceives of character dispositions as somewhat contingent on situational factors.

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11. Merritt exposits the motivational self-sufficiency of character as such: "A conception of character advances a strong ideal of MSC to the degree that it calls for the possession of the motivational structure of virtue to be, in maturity and under normal circumstances, independent of factors outside oneself, such as particular social relationships and settings" (Merritt 2000, 365).

Allowing for a third option—namely, a more modest theory of character traits that conceives of character dispositions as contingent on support from external factors[12]—opens up an entire category of character traits that has yet to be evaluated by empirical research. The "lack of evidence" for character traits purported by Harman and others, then, does not reflect an absence of any evidence that we might reasonably have expected to see if such traits existed, but rather, an absence of relevant research that might tell us *anything at all* about such traits. Thus, the situationists' claim that virtue ethics has been empirically discredited, or that "people typically lack character," (Doris 2002, 2) is not merely a prudential shift of the burden of proof, but a well-masked argument from ignorance.

5. A CONCILIATORY VIEW OF CHARACTER AND AGENCY

So why might we prefer a model of human behavior that includes a notion of character to one that does not? In the interest of fairness, we should consider the reasons situationists prefer a situationally-determined model to one that conceives of character as meaningfully instrumental in behavior. Doris writes that an ethical theory is "ameliorated by the promise of substantial advantage in the practice of deliberation" (Doris 1998, 516). In other words, all other things being equal, the theory with the most promising potential to deliver practical results in the form of virtuous behavior is the better ethical theory. The situationist strategy—David understanding his weakness towards women and alcohol and refusing to enter a situation where he would be put to the test in that area—does a fairly good job of avoiding unethical behavior, at least to the extent that one understands one's own situational weaknesses. A model like Aristotelian virtue ethics, on the other hand, clearly fails this common-sense ethical litmus test, since it fails to anticipate the power of situations to alter behavior.

A more realistic conception of character traits, however, might actually enjoy certain advantages over the situationist model in terms of producing desirable behavior. A view of character traits that rejects the notion of the motivational self-sufficiency of character maintains a healthy respect for situational factors, but still allows the potential for exercising some degree of rational, regulatory control over our behavior. If virtuous dispositions need not be motivationally self-

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12. Failing to allow for a more modest theory of character would construct a false dichotomy between character that is motivationally self-sufficient and character that impotent/nonexistent. There is no good reason to suppose that character traits could not fall somewhere in between these two categories.

sufficient, then it is plausible that their manifestations could be supported and stabilized by something other than a random-chance arrangement of social and cultural influences—something more under our control, which might allow us to resist the influence of situational factors in certain cases. One straightforward idea might be to expand on the situationist's recommendation to discover as much as possible about which situational factors one exhibits any significant sensitivity or vulnerability to. Obviously, some situational weaknesses are too powerful to trifle with—as in the case of David—but in less extreme cases, an awareness of situational factors might well help us learn how to deal with situations better. Learning more about our weaknesses, by reflecting on personal experiences, or perhaps by reading some of the literature in situationist personality psychology, can easily help us to recognize and respond to these types of factors as they present themselves. This can in turn help our virtuous dispositions to be triggered in a larger percentage of cases, in spite of certain situational factors. Some situations are better to simply avoid—but we are not powerless against all of them.

To summarize, the discussion has thus far centered around the issue of whether or not arguments from situationism against the existence of character are successful. The more ambitious claim that (1) situationist social psychology constitutes sufficient evidence to show that people do not possess character— works against the optimistic Aristotelian view of character (since advances a strong ideal of MSC), but is a nonstarter against any modest view of character. Furthermore, the resulting weaker claim that (1a) situationist social psychology constitutes sufficient evidence to show that, if people possess character, their behavior can still be influenced by situations—is not very interesting, since it poses no immediate conflict with the existence of personal character, and at any rate, the only view with which it genuinely conflicts is one that almost nobody holds anymore.

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