Conclusions from a large body of research in social psychology have posed a challenge to the legitimacy of virtue ethics. This research—often referred to as “situationist” research—appears to call into question the importance of character traits and hence of the virtues. The theme of this research is that behavior is at least as much a result of its situational context as of strong and enduring (or “robust”) character traits that manifest themselves across a wide variety of situations.

Two claims, important for the teaching of virtue ethics, have been made on the basis of situationist research. The first claim, the more theoretical of the two, is that teachers of virtue ethics should point out that the virtues are more finely differentiated than traditional virtue ethicists have supposed. A person may, for example, be honest in one type of situation and not in another. There may not be any such thing as a trait of “honesty” simpliciter. The second claim is that the ability of the virtues to influence behavior is much weaker than virtue ethicists have supposed. This “frailty” of the virtues accentuates the importance of moral education and the need to find ways of making the virtues more efficacious with respect to behavior. I want to address both of these claims, beginning with the first one, although I shall have much more to say about the second.

THE VIRTUES AS FINELY DIFFERENTIATED

Rachana Kamtekar (2004), in considering the implications of situationist research, suggests that some of our names for virtues are too inclusive. We use the term “honesty” to cover not-lying, not-cheating and not-stealing, but this may betray the character of ethical (or unethical) behavior. Put another way, I can be honest in that I do not lie, but not honest in that I might cheat on exams. Or, I might not be a particularly
courageous soldier, but I might not have the courage required to blow the whistle on corporate misconduct or to be intellectually honest in facing criticisms of my cherished religious views. The virtues do not carry over from one type of situation to another as well as we might have supposed.²

Many situationist studies appear to confirm the more differentiated character of the virtues. One of the early situationist studies was conducted by Hugh Hartshorne and Mark May in the 1920s on the moral views and behavior of thousands of children in the fifth to eight grades in several American communities. In what I shall call “The Children Study,” some of the most interesting controlled experiments focused on lying, cheating and stealing at school, at a party, and at home. Hartshorne and May found that individual children were fairly consistent in their behavior in the same type of situation, but not in different types of situation. For example, the children might cheat on tests, but be honest at home and with their friends. The results were similar for other character traits. Knowing that Jane is friendlier in one situation than Jack will only increase the likelihood that she will be friendlier than Jack in a different type of situation to 55 percent, where a 50 percent probability would be assigned in total ignorance.³

These conclusions of situationist research imply that teachers of virtue ethics should be careful in discussing the virtues and not treat them as unitary and consistent traits. Pictures of humans as always honest or always courageous or always compassionate, while perhaps useful as ideals, may apply to very few actual human beings. In describing a person as honest, one must keep in mind that people are not just honest or dishonest. He may be honest with his friends but cheat on tests. He may not lie, but this does not mean he will not cheat on his income tax. If he does not cheat on his income tax, he may steal if he thinks he can get away with it. There is no such thing, perhaps, as honesty-in-general or honesty simpliciter. If we think of the main idea of honesty as trustworthiness, one can be trustworthy in one area and not in another. We may, in fact, need different terms for honesty-in-speech and honesty-in-action. It may even be the case that these should not be considered the same virtues.

Similarly, a person may have compassion towards those far away and risk his life to engage in philanthropic work abroad, but be remarkably uncaring with regard to his own family. Thus, we should be careful in saying that “John is a compassionate person.” More accurately, we should say that “John is usually compassionate.” Ideal portraits of people who
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are always honest or always courageous or compassionate may be just that—ideals towards which one should strive—but rarely accurate descriptions of most people. People exhibit virtues in a much more differentiated way than traditional virtue ethics appears to suppose. This conclusion from situationism could provide some interesting stimulation for classroom discussion and further research in virtue ethics.

THE FRAGILITY OF THE VIRTUES AND MORAL EDUCATION

The more widely discussed claim of situationism is that the virtues are fragile in that they are not as robustly related to behavior as traditional virtue ethicists have supposed. Many situationist studies suggest that various types of external factors, some of them with no moral significance, are more important in explaining behavior than character traits. In what I shall call “The Dime Study,” an experimenter dropped a folder-full of papers in front of experimental subjects emerging from a phone booth in a shopping plaza. The subjects who had found a dime in the phone’s coin return before emerging from the booth offered assistance in fourteen out of sixteen cases. The subjects who had not found the dime offered assistance in only one out of twenty-five cases. Thus, the correlation of helpful and unhelpful behavior with the presence or absence of the dime is much higher than any cross-situational correlation for the supposed character trait of helpfulness. In other studies have similar implications. In what I shall call “The Noise Study,” subjects were five times more likely to help an apparently injured man who had dropped some books when ambient noise was at normal levels than when a power lawnmower was running nearby.

In addition to external physical factors, social influences appear to have a significant influence on the manifestation of the virtues. In what I shall call “The Good Samaritan Study,” seminarians at Princeton who were not in a hurry to meet a speaking obligation were six times more likely to help a person who appeared to be in distress than seminarians who were told they were already late for the speaking obligation. In Stanley Milgram’s (1974) well-known studies, which I shall call “The Milgram Studies,” individuals who thought they were a part of a scientific study that involved punishing people for errors, were willing to cause what appeared to be agonizing pain to the subjects of the study when only politely urged to continue to do so by the experimenter.

Psychologists John Sabini and Maury Silver (2005) find the often-cited Milgram studies of the willingness of psychological subjects
to administer supposedly painful shocks to be both important and disturbing.\textsuperscript{8} They believe we must conclude from these studies that the character of most of the individuals in the study was not adequate to prevent the brutality that was apparently taking place. The authors believe that the individuals in the Milgram studies really wanted to resist, and some of the pictures of the experimental subjects showed them in a state of turmoil. The turmoil was not, they believe, due to a perceived inner conflict between two competing obligations—the obligation to continue in the experiment (for which they were being paid) and the obligation to refrain from cruelty. Rather, Sabini and Silver believe the subjects knew what they wanted to do, but just could not bring themselves to do it, in the face of the urging of the experimenter to continue. People appear to be strongly disinclined to risk confrontation and embarrassment.

People are also strongly inclined to conform to group opinion. This tendency is manifested in studies that do not have anything to do with morality. In one of his studies of conformity, Solomon Asch (1956), Milgram’s mentor, showed experimental subjects a line, which he called the standard, and asked the subjects to identify which of three other lines was identical in length to the standard. When other supposed subjects, who were actually a part of the experiment, gave patently incorrect answers, about 75 percent of the actual subjects gave the same wrong answer.\textsuperscript{9} In another study, subjects are asked to fill out a questionnaire in a room. While doing so, fake smoke started to billow out of the ventilating system. If the subjects were alone, about 75 percent of them reported the smoke to the experimenter in the first two minutes. If others were in the room and they did not report the smoke (because they were not genuine subjects of the experiment), only 10 percent of the subjects reported the smoke in the first two minutes.\textsuperscript{10}

Some philosophers have drawn extreme conclusions from the empirical study of character traits. Gilbert Harman (1999) avers that these studies show that “there is no evidence that people differ in character traits…”\textsuperscript{11} Owen Flanagan (1991) asserts that character traits “do not exist.”\textsuperscript{12} John Doris and Stephen Stitch (2005), on the other hand, hold that the proper inference is not that character traits do not exist, but that

The Aristotelian conception of traits as robust dispositions—the sort which lead to trait-relevant behavior across a wide variety of trait-relevant situations—is radically empirically under-
supported...[so that] programmes of moral education aimed at inculcating virtues may very well be futile, and modes of ethical reflection focusing moral aspirations on the cultivation of virtue may very well be misguided.\textsuperscript{13}

This toned-down conclusion needs careful interpretation. In claiming that moral education is “futile,” Doris and Stitch are not asserting that the virtues do not exist, nor that they cannot be inculcated in individuals by training, but rather that the virtues are relatively inefficacious with respect to behavior. The virtues are “frail”—that is, not “robust”—in that they have far less influence on behavior than we might have supposed. Hence it may be relatively futile both to identify the virtues that people should have and attempt to cultivate those virtues in individuals. While the virtues as dispositions may exist, they just do not matter that much. Are there virtues? Yes. Can the virtues be taught? Yes. But why bother? Behaviorally speaking, the virtues are not all that important, so virtue theory should be relegated to a lower status, with respect to other possibly more efficacious or useful theories, such as utilitarianism or deontology.

**CORRECTING SITUATIONISM**

Situationism has not escaped criticism from psychologists themselves. John Sabini and Maury Silver make three explicit or implicit criticisms of situationist research.\textsuperscript{14} (1) Situationists overlook the fact that the relationship of behavior to the virtues is more complex than they suppose. No simple correlation exists, for example, between honesty and whether one cheats on an exam. Whether one cheats also depends on such factors as how smart one is, how much one cares about the subject, and whether one has studied. This means that the correlations across situations in cheating are not related in a straightforward way to the question of how many people are really honest. Sabini and Silver still concede, however, that we probably tend to overestimate how consistent people are from one situation to another. To take another example, whether one is consistently generous from one situation to another is more complex than one might think. Suppose John gives to one charity and Jim to many, but they both give the same total amount. Studies might ascribe more generosity to Jim, but this would be a totally erroneous conclusion.\textsuperscript{15} (2) Sabini and Silver also address the famous experiments by Stanley Milgram in which subjects were asked to administer
increasingly severe shocks. If they were willing to administer a 5-volt shock, why not 10 volts and then why not 15? Although they conclude that people in morally challenging situations should “stay away from slippery slopes,” they wonder whether these experiments were completely fair to the experimental subjects or accurately represented the strength of their compassionate instincts.\(^\text{16}\) (3) Finally, Sabini and Silver conclude that empirical psychology has identified a relatively limited number of factors that inhibit the behavioral manifestation of the virtues, but one can legitimately question how widespread the inhibiting factors really are.\(^\text{17}\)

Psychologists Shoda and Mischel (1994) have also made important criticisms of situationism.\(^\text{18}\) Central to their critique is that situationists have focused too exclusively on the external aspects of situations without adequately taking into account the meanings that the situations have for the subjects themselves. If a child reacts consistently with verbal aggression to punishment by an adult, no matter what objective setting she is in, her behavioral consistency is a function of the psychological meaning that her interpretation of the experience of being punished has for her. If another child reacts with compliance with the demands of the adult, that too is a function of the meaning that the punishment by the adult has for him. Only situation-types that have the same or similar perceived meanings for subjects are relevant to determining whether a trait consistently manifests itself. When the construal of situations by subjects is taken into account, much greater trait-consistency can be discovered.

Mischel did, however, agree that the early situationist studies, such as the 1928 studies of Hartshorne and May (1991), were correct in concluding that, if only the objective features of situations were taken into account, the correlations were too insignificant to show any significant cross-situational consistency in honesty. But even this claim, according to psychologists Peterson and Seligman, is mistaken. The correlations of honesty scores across situations “are higher than the correlations between cigarette smoking and lung cancer, between antihistamine use and reduced sniffing, or between adherence to an AZT regimen and the progression of AIDS.” They are also as robust as the effects of the situation in such well-known social psychology experiments as Milgram’s (1963) investigation of obedience or Darley and Latane’s (1968) study of unpresponsible bystanders.\(^\text{19}\)

Peterson and Seligman (2004) claim that many psychologists and philosophers have over-reacted to the situationist critique of virtue ethics.
Peterson and Seligman have taken it as their task to “reclaim psychology’s early concern with character by drawing on a century’s worth of hard-learned lessons about how to conduct good psychological research.” In constructing the new character psychology in the light of situationist research and its limitations, however, they believe the following picture emerges:

No one talks seriously about types of people anymore; personality characteristics are now described along more-versus-less dimensions. No one discusses behavior without reference to the setting, both proximal and distal. No one assesses a personality characteristic with a one-shot measure—this would be akin to limiting the SAT to one question or basing a college grade point average on performance in one course only. And no one believes that people are completely inconsistent across situations.

Taking into account the psychological criticisms of situationism, the following picture emerges. (1) The type-psychological account of character, based on wholly consistent and “global” character traits is probably inaccurate. We must see people as more-or-less honest, courageous, and so forth. The virtues (and no doubt the vices as well) are more finely differentiated than earlier philosophers and psychologists supposed. This conclusion has been discussed earlier, and I will have nothing more to say about it here. (2) The setting or situation is a crucial part of any attempt to support virtuous behavior. Setting includes such things as institutional context (such as corporate culture), physical conditions (such as sounds and odors), external demands (such as whether one is rushed and how much one needs to pass an exam), and many other factors. (3) The meaning of a situation to an actor is important in that actor’s response to it. A soldier may display extraordinary courage in a combat situation if he believes victory is important for his nation’s survival, but diminished courage if he believes victory is not that important, or his country is not worth sacrificing for anyhow. A student may not cheat because he is well prepared and does not need to, or because he is wiling to get by with a mere passing grade. Apart from knowing a subject’s construal of a situation, it is impossible to know whether the behavior is an accurate indicator of the presence or absence of a virtue.
THE CHALLENGE OF SITUATIONISM AND WEAKNESS OF WILL

Despite the excesses of the earlier situationists, their research did serve as a wake-up call for earlier psychologists and virtue theorists, cautioning them that the connection between virtues and behavior is not as simple and straightforward as they might have supposed. Interestingly, the influence of external features of a situation, including the actions of other people, can influence behavior has seemed to some to suggest the traditional doctrine of weakness of will. Sabini and Silver (2005) say that situationist research shows something important about character and morally significant action...just how weak, morally weak, we are when confronted with a resolute authority or a unanimous group of other seemingly normal people who seem to see the social, moral, and even physical world differently from the way we do. This weakness is partly cognitive—people tend to lose their moral compass—but is also partly a matter of people’s being unable or unwilling to expose themselves, to disrupt social situations, by exposing their different perceptions of the world.22

Donald Davidson (1980) characterizes weak-willed or incontinent action in the following way:

In doing b an agent acts incontinently if and only if: (a) the agent does b intentionally; (b) the agent believes there is an alternative a open to him, and (c) the agent judges that, all things considered, it would be better to do a than to do b.23

All three of these characteristics may have been manifested in the Milgram experiments, for example. The agents acted with intention and were aware that they did not have to go on with the experiments. Sabini and Silver believe the third condition was also met, although it is not clear to me that one can be sure whether the conflicts going on in the minds of the subjects were due to the inability to do what they believed was right (due to weakness of will) or the inability to decide between the obligation to continue in experiments in which they had agreed to participate and the obligation not to cause excessive pain to the experimental subjects. I am inclined to think that in some experimental subjects the conflict was of the first type and in others it was of the second type.
In either case, the implication of situationism is clear: promoting virtuous behavior requires serious attention to moral education. This in turn implies that greater attention should be paid to moral education in the teaching of virtue ethics. To be sure, virtue ethicists—and presumably teachers of virtue ethics—have long recognized the importance of training in the virtues, especially for the young. But the results of situationist research suggest that the topic deserves even more sustained attention. In the remainder of this essay I want to consider three ways in which virtuous behavior can be promoted. Insofar as possible, I shall call on empirical moral psychology for guidance.

**PROMOTING VIRTUOUS BEHAVIOR: MORAL REASONING**

Virtue theorists have long recognized the central place of moral reasoning in producing virtuous behavior. For Aristotle, practical reason molds behavior by requiring us to act in a way that is appropriate to a situation, as determined by rational deliberation. If a virtue is a “mean,” it is always “relative to us,” as he says; that is, it is relative to the conditions under which a particular action is performed. A part of the process of planting the virtues in individuals—especially in the young—is teaching the ability to engage in deliberation about the relevance of the virtues to the peculiar—perhaps unique—conditions of the moral situation. The morally appropriate—and hence virtuous—action is always the one that takes into account the specifics of the situation.

Suggestions of the importance of moral reasoning are present in some of the situationist studies. The experimental subjects sometimes appear to be balancing conflicting ethical demands. In The Good Samaritan studies, for example, seminarians may have found it necessary to balance the obligation to help someone in need with the obligation to get to an appointment on time. I have already suggested that at least some of the conflicts in the subjects of the Milgram experiments may have been due to the fact that they perceived themselves as caught between the obligation to show mercy to the person being shocked and the obligation to complete an experiment for which they were being paid.

Following the lead of Lawrence Kohlberg, the “developmental” tradition in empirical moral psychology takes cognition as its starting point. Instead of a rigid “stage” theory, however, neo-Kohlbergians endorse a “schema” theory, schemas being “general knowledge structures residing in long term memory.” Schemas are evoked by current stimulus configurations that resemble previous stimuli. There are
various types of schemas: person schemas (extroverted or introverted), event schemas (what one does at a restaurant) and role schemas (a professor, a cowboy). Three schemas, closely resembling role schemas, are especially important for morality. From the standpoint of the “Personal Interests” schema, actions are justified in terms of the benefits to the actor. In the “Maintaining Norms” schema, the criterion is “doing one’s duty according to one’s station and role position in society.” Deference to authority and to established norms is of central importance. In the “Postconventional” schema, determining moral obligations is based on “shared ideals, which are reciprocal and are open to debate and tests of logical consistency, and on the experience of the community.” From the standpoint of this schema, moral arrangements can be questioned, so openness, tolerance, a questioning attitude, and valuing of impartiality are virtues. Individuals are rarely characterized exclusively by one schema, but rather by the frequency with which they adopt one schema or the other. Moral schemas guide moral thinking, especially on general social policy issues, such as “abortion rights, religion in the public schools, women’s roles, rights of the accused, rights of homosexuals, free-speech issues” and others. They also guide professional decision making. Moral education intervention that promotes more frequent use of the “Postconventional” schema is assisted by such things as a college education and discussion of moral dilemmas.

Moral education by way of increasing moral reasoning skills has also been found to be useful in improving the professional responsibility and even in some cases the general professional performance of members of various professional groups. Donnie Self (2004) has found that even clinical performance of medical students is correlated with proficiency in moral reasoning, and that moral reasoning can be improved by classes in medical ethics and small-group discussions of moral issues. Muriel Bebeau has found schema theory useful in the moral education of dentists cited by their regulatory boards for professional misconduct. Discussion of the nature of the implicit “social contract” between professionals and society and of the characteristics of professionalism has been useful in ethical remediation and, in most cases, preventing further citations for ethical misconduct. Moral education evidently promotes virtuous behavior in areas such as caring, empathy, and honesty.
PROMOTING VIRTUOUS BEHAVIOR: “AUTOMATIC” RESPONSES

Virtue theorists have long acknowledged, however, that conscious moral reasoning is not the only thing that contributes to virtuous behavior. Non-cognitive, immediate responses to people and situations also play a part. Aristotle recognized the importance of inculcating virtuous habits in the young. Rosalind Hursthouse is especially suggestive with regard to the non-cognitive aspects of the virtues. A virtue, she says, is concerned

with emotions and emotional reactions, choices, values, desires, perceptions, attitudes, interests expectations and sensibilities.

To possess a virtue is to be a certain sort of person with a certain complex mindset. Hence the extreme recklessness of attributing a virtue on the basis of a single action. The most significant aspect of this mindset is the whole hearted acceptance of a certain range of considerations as reasons for action.... The honest person recognizes “That would be a lie” as a strong (though perhaps not overriding) reason for not making certain statements in certain circumstances, and gives due, but not overriding, weight to “That would be the truth” as a reason for making them. ...She disapproves of, dislikes, deplores dishonesty, is not amused by certain tales of chicanery, despises or pities those who succeed by dishonest means rather than thinking they have been clever, is unsurprised, or pleased (as appropriate) when honesty triumphs, is shocked or distressed when those near and dear to her do what is dishonest and so on. Given that a virtue is such a multi-track disposition, it would obviously be reckless to attribute one to an agent on the basis of a single observed action or even a series of similar actions, especially if you don’t know the agent’s reasons for doing as she did.32

Since being an honest person also includes immediate, emotive, and spontaneous reactions that appear to short-circuit conscious deliberation, types of moral education other than training in moral reasoning must also be employed. Traditional virtue ethics has tried to accommodate this aspect of moral educating by advocating the telling of stories of moral exemplars and by moral exhortation.

Since the 1990s, empirical moral psychology experienced an “affective revolution” which has confirmed the importance of the non-cognitive aspects of the virtues. It has emphasized that promoting ethical
conduct involves more than developing expertise in conscious moral reasoning. Rather, moral judgment is more a matter of emotion and affective intuition than deliberate reasoning. This trend was reinforced by the focus on “automaticity,” which is “the mind’s ability to solve many problems, including high-level social ones, unconsciously and automatically.” The automatic responses, best thought of as affect-laden intuitions, appear suddenly and effortlessly in consciousness. For example, prejudice is often an instantaneous reaction to skin color, not under conscious control and often below the level of consciousness. Conscious moral reasoning is used primarily to justify pre-ordained conclusions, to influence other people, and to resolve interpersonal conflicts.

The development of most acquired forms of automaticity “depends on the frequent and consistent pairing of internal responses with external events.” This suggests that automatic responses can be modified by different pairings. Suppose a person has an immediate reaction of disgust at the sight of a stereotypical homosexual man. Then he gets to know him and others like him and develops a strong sense of admiration for his courage in being himself in the face of social criticism. It is likely that the original affective reaction will undergo diminution or even extinction. In the language of traditional virtue ethics, his habitual reactions will change. Traditional ways of influencing affective reactions, such as moral exhortation and stories of moral exemplars, may also be useful. Discussions of how the emotions can be affected would be appropriate in a class in virtue ethics.

**PROMOTING VIRTUOUS BEHAVIOR: SOCIAL SUPPORT**

We have seen that situationists place great emphasis on the role that external factors play in the manifestation of the virtues in behavior. Many factors that situationist research has found to affect the behavioral manifestation of the virtues have little if any moral significance—higher levels of sunshine, low wind velocity, moderate temperature, the absence of irritating noise, the presence of a dime, and so forth. Other external factors, such as virtuous behavior on the part of others and public approval of such behavior, have a moral dimension.

It may be that the strong support given by Athenian society for the aristocratic ideal portrayed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* was so pervasive that Aristotle was not sufficiently conscious of the importance of the external setting as a support for virtuous behavior. However, the fact that he
insisted on the intimate connection between his ethical writings and the *Politics* may be evidence that he did recognize the importance of external setting. In any case, the difficulty most humans have in living virtuous lives apart from a supportive social context should be acknowledged in the teaching of virtue ethics. Situationist research underlines the importance of providing an environment in which the virtues can flourish. Apart from this environment, the virtues are less robust than we would like to believe.

Situationist research suggests that a class in virtue ethics should spend time considering how situations that promote the virtuous behavior can be promoted. I will suggest two possibilities. Organizations can set up an environment that is supportive of ethical behavior. The environment can include provision for exposing wrong doing on the part of other employees and expressing opinions that are contrary to organizational policy. They can include hotlines and other avenues for anonymous complaints. Since the virtues are fragile and cannot be expected in most cases to hold up under organizational disapproval, provisions that make virtuous behavior easier are important. The larger society can also promote and protect virtuous behavior by enacting whistleblower laws and other legal protections. Professional societies can promote ethical behavior by revoking the membership of unethical members, providing funding for the defense of members who encounter legal and other problems as a result of their ethical behavior, and establishing awards for outstanding examples of ethical behavior.

**CONCLUSION**

Empirical moral psychology has by no means completely undermined the validity of virtue ethics or its legitimate place in the panoply of ethical approaches taken by philosophers. It has, however, provided grounds for increased emphasis upon certain traditional themes in virtue ethics, such as the importance of moral deliberation, the non-cognitive aspect of the virtues, and the importance of moral education. It has also underlined the need to refine the vocabulary of the virtues and to recognize the need for their social support. More generally, it has forced us to recognize that humans are probably more complex, inconsistent and weak-willed in manifesting the virtues than we would like to suppose.
NOTES


7 Stanley Milgram, Obedience to Authority (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).


14 Sabini and Silver, op. cit. 535-562.

15 Ibid, p. 554.

16 Ibid, p. 562.

C. E. Harris, Jr.: Teaching Virtue Ethics: The Implications of “Situationism”


21 Ibid, p. 59.


24 Nicomachen Ethics 1106a36-b7.


29 Ibid, pp. 310-311.


32 Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, entry on “Virtue Ethics.”

