Because people often act out of character, some have suggested that character traits do not exist or that they have a negligible impact on our actions. It is situational factors, they argue, that are the primary determinants of our actions, for even minute and irrelevant details of situations have a significant effect on our behavior. Proponents of this view (situationists) suggest that numerous social psychology experiments provide support for this claim. Situationists also claim that because virtue ethics is grounded in the claim that a strong relationship exists between character traits and action, virtue ethics is grounded in an empirical mistake.

In addition to its impact on virtue ethics, the situationist argument has clear implications for moral education. If character traits do not exist, or have little effect on behavior, then, the situationist argues, character development as a means of moral education is ineffective; that is, because character development is not possible, it should not be employed as a means of moral education. The situationist would level a similar indictment against teaching ethics, perhaps suggesting that the endeavor is strictly an academic affair with its primary value being that it introduces students to influential historical ideas and ethical issues associated with various disciplines. The situationist would argue that social psychology experiments undermine the claim that teaching ethics promotes better ethical decision making and actions, because even if a person recognized one form of ethical reasoning as appropriate to a situation, say the utilitarian approach, situational factors would determine how the person acted rather than the desire to adhere to the judgments derived from utilitarian reasoning. Even though the situationist argument has some merit, these claims, that character development is not possible and that the teaching of ethics is not useful, are not supported by the situationist argument. In this paper I argue that even if many of the fundamental claims of the situationist argument are accepted, character development is still conceptually possible and teaching ethics is still useful.
THE SITUATIONIST CHALLENGE: DO GLOBAL CHARACTER TRAITS EXIST?

Situationists argue that when we attribute a character trait to someone, it is a global attribution in that we expect that person to consistently act in a trait-appropriate manner in all situations in which she finds herself. However, because unimportant and irrelevant situational factors can dramatically determine a person’s actions, situational factors, rather than global character traits (hereafter referred to as global traits), are the primary determinants of our actions. Therefore, situationists propose that character traits, if they even exist, are not global and are only (at best) of secondary importance when considering how our actions are determined.2

In support of their claims, situationists point to various social psychology experiments conducted over the past 80 years, beginning with Hugh Hartshorne’s and Mark May’s 1928 study regarding the honest and dishonest behavior of schoolchildren (Doris Character 24). One of the paradigmatic situationist examples is Stanley Milgram’s obedience experiment, where subjects were told that they would administer increasing levels of electric shocks to a person (the learner) to determine if these shocks promoted learning.3 During the experiment, subjects were encouraged by the experimenter to continue administering the shocks, despite the learner’s protests, shouts of pain, and requests for help. One hundred percent of the subjects progressed to the high end of the “Intense Shock” range, with sixty-five percent of subjects administering the maximum voltage (450 volts), which was labeled “XXX”, was “past the label ‘Danger: Severe Shock,’ and well past the point at which the learner had stopped responding in any way” (Milgram 373). Employing Milgram’s results as evidence,4 situationists claim that it was a mistake to conclude that the subjects possessed different character traits or bad character traits; instead, they claim that irrelevant factors, such as an incremental movement towards objectionable behavior and the difficulty people have confronting authorities and experts, were the determinants of the subjects’ actions (Harman 322).5

While the Milgram experiment dealt with the willingness of subjects to inflict harm, there have also been experiments that focused on helping behavior. John Darley and Bibb Latane conducted an experiment that examined how bystanders react to emergencies. In this experiment, subjects were placed alone in a booth so that they could communicate anonymously with another college student (the discussant) regarding the
discussant’s problems adapting to college. At the beginning of the conversation, the discussant mentioned that he was prone to seizures. As the discussion progresses, subjects are led to believe that the discussant is having a seizure. The dependent variable in the experiment was the number of other people that subjects believed were listening to the conversation (Darley and Latane 378).6

When the subject thought that she was alone (that only she could hear the discussant’s apparent seizure), the average time for a subject to seek assistance was 52 seconds. With one additional person listening, this time increased to 93 seconds; when the subject believed that four other people were listening, the time it took her to seek assistance increased to 166 seconds (Darley and Latene 380). This led situationists to conclude that it was not the character of subjects that determined their time to seek assistance (i.e. that some subjects were compassionate and others not); what mattered most was group size. As with the Milgram experiment, situationists point to a situational factor that should not have had any effect on whether subjects sought assistance, but turned out to have a significant impact on the subjects’ behavior. Manipulation of the characteristics of the situation, and the inclusion of irrelevant situational factors, seem to be the cause of differences in behavior rather than differences in subjects’ character.7

Employing social psychology experiments as their support, both Gilbert Harman and John Doris propose what Christian Miller calls “global trait eliminativism,” suggesting that global traits do not determine our actions and, thus, do not exist (Miller 3). Harman claims that the results of social psychology experiments completely undermine conceptions of any type of character traits, which he sees as a fundamental assumption employed in virtue ethics. He concludes that “there is no empirical basis for the existence of character traits” (Harman 316), but even if there were, there “is no evidence that people differ in character traits” (Harman 329). Harman proposes that it is a mistake to attribute character traits to people to explain differences in behavior; instead, he suggests that what explains differences in behavior is that people find themselves in different situations are influenced by different situational factors (Harman 329).

John Doris presents a more moderate version of situationism. He accepts that character traits exist, but argues that they are much weaker with a much smaller scope than the Globalist account implies. Doris thinks that people are too sensitive to irrelevant situational factors for global traits to be common. Doris does, however, allow for the
“possibility of temporally stable, situation-particular, ‘local’ traits that are associated with important individual differences in behavior…[however] these local traits are likely to be extremely fine-grained” (Doris Character 25). Doris accepts that character traits do exist, but that they will produce consistent behavior only in situations with very particular circumstances. Any alteration of these circumstances will cause behavior to vary, as “even seemingly inconsequential situational variations may ‘tap’ different dispositions, eventuating in inconsistent behavior” (Doris Character 25).

Given these conclusions about character traits, Harman concludes, “If there is no such thing as character, there is no such thing as character building” (Harman 328). For Harman, promoting moral growth in terms of character development is not possible. Doris’ claims are less sweeping than Harman’s, but he does suggest that character education programs probably do not develop character at all. The fact that these programs place children with devoted adults who employ abundant resources means that even if the behavior of the children improves, this is not necessarily evidence of the existence of character traits or the possibility of character development (Doris Character 126-127).8

MAKING ROOM FOR CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE SITUATIONIST FRAMEWORK

In what follows, I argue that a conception of character development can still exist within the framework offered by situationists. By character development, I mean an intentional intervention focused on developing within individuals the disposition to act and feel certain morally praiseworthy ways through the creation, strengthening, and broadening of character traits.9 It is important to note that my argument is focused on the conceptual possibility of character development; the task of testing this concept would fall to psychologists and educators.

THE POSSIBILITY OF CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

If only global traits can produce consistent actions across various situations, and only an Aristotelian conception of virtues, which are rare, can be considered global traits, then situationists are correct in asserting that irrelevant situational factors have a greater influence on behavior than commonly thought.10 Since the majority of people do not possess global traits (a claim most virtue ethicists would agree with), they will be vulnerable to the effects of these situational factors. However, the fact
that people are extremely sensitive to situational factors and do not possess global traits does not entail that they do not possess character traits at all or that these traits cannot be strengthened or broadened.

As I discussed above, Doris is willing to grant that people can possess local traits, although he concludes that these traits are so narrowly focused that they are ineffective in determining our actions in most situations. From his view on local traits, and his admission that global traits may exist but are extremely rare, Doris creates the scenario of two separate and distinct groups: the very small minority who possess global traits, and the majority who possess local traits. By doing this, he denies that there can be any character traits with a strength and scope that fall between local and global traits. He also does not leave open the possibility that those with local character traits can improve the strength and scope of these traits and move closer to the ideal represented by the concept of global traits. He is implying that situational factors serve as permanent barriers to character development. It is Doris’ challenge on which I will focus.

To respond to Doris’ challenge, I begin with the ideas expressed in David Norton's claim that, “moral growth is always possible,” and the individual who seeks moral growth can view the approach towards the ideal as a series of steps. “What counts now is the next step [and the] fact that each next step invokes another, and thus no step can be final, does not bespeak the impracticability of ideals” (Norton 185). Thus, a key assumption that underlies virtue ethics, as well as our common experience, is that it is possible to strive and progress towards the ideal of virtue. Even if achieving global traits is extremely difficult and unlikely, people can broaden and strengthen local traits. If this is so, character development is possible.

As people seek to broaden and strengthen their character traits, they aspire to achieve an ideal. Andrew Flescher notes, “Aspiration…is essential to human nature and so it is essential to eudaimonistic living…[a]spiration involves striving to become something different, something better (Flescher 248). Part of becoming better is coming to understand our own weaknesses and compensating for them so that we are closer to the ideal. These weaknesses can be: personal, developed due to our upbringing or because of our individual nature; societal, developed because of the characteristics of the society one lives in; and they can be weaknesses that we possess simply because we are human. Aristotle highlights the idea of weaknesses when he suggests that:
We must also examine what we ourselves drift into easily. For
different people have different natural tendencies towards
different goals, and we shall come to know our own tendencies
from the pleasure or pain that arises in us. We must drag
ourselves off in the contrary direction; for if we pull far away
from error, as they do in straightening bent wood, we shall
reach the intermediate condition (Aristotle 1109b1-1109b7).

Knowing oneself (as an individual, a member of a society, and as a
human), especially one’s weaknesses, is essential if one desires to improve
morally. The results of social psychology experiments are a critical aspect
of self-knowledge and are especially useful in identifying weaknesses. If
we know what weaknesses we possess, and how they will affect us in
various types of situations, we are able to avoid error. In the end,
Aristotle would agree with the situationist that situational factors can
determine a person’s actions. The difference is that Aristotle would argue
that the effects of many of these situational factors can be overcome by
compensating for their effects.

Through social psychology experiments, researchers have identified
situational factors such as: the “urban overload hypothesis,” which states
that those living in cities keep to themselves because their environment
produces constant stimulation; the “bystander effect,” which proposes
that the greater the number of bystanders present at an emergency, the
lower probability that any one of them will offer assistance; “pluralistic
ignorance,” which suggests that if people in the vicinity of an emergency
look unconcerned, others arriving at the scene will assume nothing is
wrong; and finally, the fact that people are generally too obedient to
authority figures (Aronson, Wilson, and Akert 373-377). All of these are
impediments to performing trait-appropriate actions and are facts about
the situation that should be irrelevant to how we act. Given this, it is
surely possible for a person to learn how these factors distort our
perception of situations and affect our behavior. This learning is part of
character development, as it allows a person to compensate for the
effects of situational factors, and in the process, broaden and strengthen
his character traits.

To overcome the effects of situational factors, a person must have
the necessary knowledge and skills. Nancy Sherman captures this idea
when she writes, “to make a choice requires both preparedness at the
front end (e.g. requisite skills and education) as well as a willingness at the
time of action to follow through” (Sherman 99). Many of those who
were too obedient or who did not offer assistance did not possess the
requisite skills and knowledge to recognize that they were acting contrary
to how they would typically act or how they would act if given time to
reflect. They also did not recognize that the types of situations they
encountered often cause people to act contrary to how they would
typically act and contrary to trait-appropriate behavior. It was not that
they lacked the will or attitude to not harm or to help another person; it
was that the situations they faced were intentionally ambiguous or
complex, and they lacked the skills to overcome what Robert Adams calls
“moral ambushes.”

Adams suggests that the situational factors present in many social
psychology experiments act as moral ambushes because they involve
“taking subjects by surprise or even deceiving them”; additionally, these
situations contain factors that are irrelevant to how we should act, but
that researchers know will have an impact on subjects’ behavior. These
situational factors, when combined with the fact that “much of the
situationist evidence of morally inconsistent behavior comes from
contexts of relatively unreflective behavior,” makes it unsurprising, at
least for the virtue ethicist, that many people fail to successfully navigate
these situations (Adams 137). Facing these types of situations is
analogous to seeing a stick in water for the first time without much time
to reflect on what is happening. It is natural to think that the stick is bent,
but this is only because we are not prepared at the front end, as Sherman
says, with the skills and knowledge associated with the concept of light
refraction. Once we have this knowledge, however, we are no longer
confused and make the proper judgment. The same applies for subjects
in social psychology experiments, as being prepared at the front end
would make it more likely that they would avoid the moral ambushes
found in these experiments.

Researchers focused on providing subjects with the necessary skills
and knowledge at the front end when they established two groups for an
experiment that measured how many subjects would assist a student lying
on the floor in the presence of an unconcerned bystander. One group,
two weeks prior to the experiment, had heard a lecture on research
connected to the bystander effect, while the other group did not attend
the lecture. Forty-three percent of those who heard the lecture offered
assistance to the student, while only twenty-five percent of the other
subjects did (Aronson, Wilson, and Akert 382). While the results of this
experiment are not conclusive, it does leave open the possibility that
situational factors can be overcome and are not permanent impediments
to trait-appropriate behavior. If one lecture can possibly help people
overcome situational factors, then so too should informal and formal character development efforts.

In this section I proposed that the situationist argument leads to a denial of character development of the sort we have common experience with and that is an important element of virtue ethics. In response, I argued that even though most people will not achieve global traits, it is conceptually possible for them to strengthen and broaden the character traits they possess.

**PROFESSION-SPECIFIC CHARACTER TRAITS**

Doris admits that global traits are theoretically possible, but suggests that if they do exist they are so rare and unobtainable to the average person that they should not be the foundation of our moral psychology and, accordingly, our moral education efforts (Doris *Replies* 666). The best the great majority of us can do is the achievement of local traits. However, as I argued in the last section, improving the scope and strength of local traits seems to be conceptually possible given Doris’ admission that both global and local traits exist. Yet, even if I am wrong that character development is possible on a large scale, Doris provides another opening for the possibility of character development with his discussion of military training and how it develops strong and broad character traits within military members.

Doris proposes that “soldiers exhibit behavioral reliability in the face of extraordinary situational pressures; military training seems to exhibit substantial success in inculcating traits like martial valor or at least in producing the behaviors associated with martial valor” (Doris *Character* 124). He suggests that this is possible because of the control that the military has over its members, the ability to use coercion to enforce that control, and the fact that the military possesses a common “ethical life.” Here, Doris grants that military members can develop character traits that are broader and stronger than local traits. Despite granting this possibility, Doris does not feel that this model is applicable on a larger scale because “the relevant consistency will be difficult to achieve for most human beings in most cultures and, second, that if such consistency is realized, it may be at a price in civil liberty that seems too high for even a modestly liberal society to pay” (Doris *Character* 125). He suggests that the character development attained by military members is not possible for those outside of the military. What I will propose is that these sorts of character traits (profession-specific character traits) are possible in
professions besides the military, which would imply that Doris’ view that local traits are the best that most can achieve is shortsighted.

Professions offer, in many ways, self-contained environments and a common ethical life within which the professional operates. The ethical problems and types of situations that the professional faces are most times identifiable and foreseeable given the nature of the profession. New ethical issues or situational factors will arise within the professional context, but their rise is more predictable and their effects can often be pre-empted or reacted to in a swift and organized manner. Within the military, for instance, issues surrounding the status and handling of noncombatants, and the effects of experience in combat, are examined constantly and incorporated into training. In medicine, some of the significant issues concern when to withhold treatment and patient confidentiality, and these issues are addressed in professional schooling, professional journals, and by professional organizations. Again, new issues arise, but the corporate nature of professions allows for a collective examination of problems and a resolution on how to handle them; training and education is also provided, if needed.

The same sort of effort would be applied if there were situational factors that caused professionals to perform actions that deviated from what a good professional would do. If, for instance, it is discovered that doctors are more likely to make poor decisions, perhaps treating patients unfairly because of an irrelevant situational factor such as the level of light in the operating room, then doctors and their professional organization would publicize this problem and develop a method to mitigate this factor. Surgeons would then know that they should check the level of light before interacting with patients. Also, it would seem unlikely that a paramedic would be influenced by the bystander effect when performing her role as an EMT, as she has been trained and prepared to focus on the patient’s needs, even when bystanders are present. Thus, professionals benefit both from their own expertise, experience, and reflection, as well as from the collective knowledge maintained by the profession’s corporate body.

The idea of profession-specific character traits resembles arguments made by numerous philosophers. For example, Robert Adams suggests that:

One of the commoner, and probably more commonly successful, ways of trying to learn to be good is by learning to inhabit well a good social role. One can learn and seek to be a good parent, a good friend, a good teacher, good supervisor [or
a] good citizen. This is not the only, nor probably the most admirable way of being virtuous. But I believe it can and sometimes does issue in a sort of genuine excellence in being for the good, which may constitute a genuine virtue (Adams 142).

Adams’ claim that one can possess a virtue solely focused on occupation of a social role is controversial, but what is not so controversial is that we often learn to be good within these social roles. We aim for excellence that is compatible with, but separate from, the good of a human life. Through this focus, we develop character traits that allow us to achieve a definable good associated with a particular role (Adams 142). Adams also suggests that the fact that we occupy the role helps sustain our disposition to act in a role appropriate manner (Adams 142). By thinking of ourselves as a teacher, doctor, lawyer, or soldier, we recognize that we must possess certain character traits; this motivates us to seek development of these traits, reflect on their nature, and consider what it means to exemplify them in diverse situations. We also take seriously any impediments (such as situational factors) that affect whether we perform trait-appropriate actions.

If there are going to be strong and broad character traits within professions, there must be a conception of practical wisdom that provides a connection to the good of the profession and also allows a person to identify and act on the morally salient features of a situation. Neera Badhwar provides such a conception with her idea of fragmented practical wisdom operating within domains of our lives.

Badhwar describes a domain as “any area or realm of practical concern that can be psychologically isolated from other practical concerns, and that is important enough to justify the ascription of practical wisdom and virtue” (Badhwar 316). Within each domain, Badhwar suggests that it is possible to possess practical wisdom (Badhwar 319). This type of practical wisdom allows us to perceive and respond correctly to situations, as well as feel and have the correct attitude towards our goals and actions. Practical wisdom can be achieved within a profession because there are limits to the types of situations experienced by professionals, and, as I mentioned above, professions have a clearer conception of excellence than does life in general. What I mean here is that it is generally easier, though not necessarily easy, to determine what it means to achieve excellence as a doctor, soldier, or teacher, than it is to determine excellence as a human. Clearly, the concerns facing professions expand as new technology and the like bring
new challenges; however, these concerns are less in scale than what a person faces concerning her entire life. The concept of practical wisdom within a profession becomes plausible when one considers that conceptions of excellence within professions are often explicit and publicized, professionals receive years of education and training, and professional associations constitute a sort of collective mind, consolidating lessons learned and solutions to problems, as well as connecting professionals with each other.

The possibility of character traits associated with, and developed through, participation in professions suggests that many people, at least those engaged in endeavors similar to professions, are capable of developing character traits that are stronger and broader than Doris’ conception of local traits. Developing these sorts of character traits does not necessarily require a military-type environment, but should have some of the characteristics noted above. If this is true, character development is possible within the realm of professions.

**THE IMPLICATION FOR TEACHING ETHICS**

Much of what I wrote above in defense of character development against the situationist critique also applies to defending the practice of teaching ethics. The benefits of teaching ethics, at least conceptually, include students developing the abilities to identify ethically relevant aspects of situations and clearly reason when faced with ethical problems; it also includes developing the motivation to do what they determine is morally right. The worry created by the situationist argument is that this knowledge and ability become useless if situational factors determine our behavior. That is, situational factors may hinder our ability to recognize the morally relevant characteristics of situations developed through ethics instruction, making what we learn from this instruction to be irrelevant when we actually make decisions. Situational factors may also prevent us from doing what we know is morally right, even if we are motivated to perform actions that cohere with our moral judgments. Therefore, situationists conclude, even if people are motivated to promote the greatest happiness, and ethics instruction has provided them the ability to determine the course of action that promotes the greatest happiness, situational factors will likely cause people to act unreflectively when faced with real problems. This will negate any of the above mentioned benefits attained from receiving ethics instruction.
The effects of situational factors need not nullify the benefits of ethics instruction, and those who teach ethics need not fear or ignore these factors. If a course has the goal of better preparing students to identify ethical issues within and across disciplines, as well as improving their ability to resolve ethical problems, then it would make sense to address situational factors during this course. In the context of ethics instruction, situational factors could be presented to students as obstacles that prevent people from recognizing that a situation called for respecting humanity (in the Kantian sense) or promoting the greatest happiness (in the utilitarian sense). Understanding that these factors can cause one to overlook ethically relevant characteristics suggests to students that when faced with certain types of situations they should pause and reflect before acting. Accordingly, the fact that situational factors exist and affect people does not completely undermine the benefits of teaching ethics.

In addition to identifying and evaluating situational factors for the purpose of promoting better ethical decision making, addressing them when teaching ethics also promotes an understanding of why people act the way they do, especially those who perform harmful actions that are counter to commonly accepted ethical judgments (such as the actions of subjects in the Milgram experiment or of soldiers at Abu Ghraib). There are numerous reasons for doing this. First, it allows students to understand the reasons that people perform clearly immoral actions, potentially reducing cynicism about ethics instruction. Secondly, it helps students understand that their ethics instruction is not merely an academic exercise. As I mentioned in the paragraph above, students can learn to overcome the effects of situational factors so that they perform actions that conform to their ethical judgments rather than acting in the way that many subjects do in social psychology experiments. Finally, students learn how to employ the descriptive power of ethics in order to evaluate the surprising actions that occur in social psychology experiments. Thus, the situationist argument does not undermine the value of teaching ethics; in fact, there are good reasons to believe that identifying and examining these factors while teaching ethics may actually enhance ethics instruction.

CONCLUSION

In the paper I have argued that the situationist contention that the influence of situational factors makes character development an
implausible concept and teaching ethics useless does not follow even if the situationists’ fundamental claims are accepted. Character development is possible within the situationist framework, allowing for local traits to be strengthened and broadened and for situational factors to be overcome. I have also argued that profession-specific character traits are conceptually possible and have the potential to produce cross-situationally consistent behavior within the context of professions. Additionally, there are still benefits to ethics instruction, even if one accepts the fact that situational factors have a significant impact on our actions.

NOTES

1 This paper was presented at the Virginia Philosophical Association annual meeting in October 2009 in Lynchburg, Virginia. It was also presented at the University of Virginia Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference in April 2010 in Charlottesville, Virginia.


3 It is important to note that Milgram’s aim was not to determine whether global character traits existed, but to study obedience. I thank Professor Dan Devereux for bringing up this point.

4 The Milgram experiment represented a novel and extreme situation for its subjects. Because of this, one might object to the situationist making claims based on its experimental results; perhaps we attain some cross-situationally consistent behavior in our everyday lives, but not in these extreme and novel cases. Doris would respond in two ways. First, on page 26 of Lack of Character, he suggests that the regularity we see in our daily actions results from the regularity of the situations we face (not from global traits). Secondly, if character traits were global, they would be effective in extreme and novel situations like those faced by the Milgram subjects.

5 One fact that is often overlooked is that the results of the Milgram experiment do reflect the existence of a character trait: obedience to authority. “I thank Professor Dan Devereux for bringing up this point.”
6 The subject was led to believe that there were other subjects listening; in reality, the experimenters used tape recordings to simulate the presence of other subjects.


8 On page 60 of *Character*, Doris grants that “situationism does not preclude the existence of a few saints who possess global traits, just as it does not preclude the existence of a few monsters. But these ‘tails of the bell curve,’ the situationist claims, are exceptions that prove the rule: ‘Altruistic personalities’ with consistent behavioral implications, if they exist, are remarkable precisely because they are rare.”

9 By strengthening and broadening character traits, I mean the development of cross-situational consistency enabling the traits to produce trait-relevant behavior in a greater number and more diverse types of circumstances.

10 I will use global traits and virtues synonymously, since only virtues can be considered global traits.

11 Doris may actually consider there to be groups of people who do not possess character traits at all (even local ones), but this possibility is not relevant to the point I am making.

12 I want to thank Professors Dan Devereux, Loren Lomasky, and Talbot Brewer for their comments and efforts regarding the revision of a previous version of this paper.

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