SCRIPTING SITUATIONS IN MORAL EDUCATION

Deborah S. Mower
Youngstown State University

INTRODUCTION

We all know the story of the Good Samaritan—or at least, we know the gist of it: that a kind stranger stopped to help a man in need. But the parable is not merely a tale of one person helping another; rather, it is a tale of differences in the helping behaviors between a religious person, a religious official, and a man from the reviled Samaria:

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” He answered: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind;” and, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’
Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.” Luke 10:25-37 NIV

What is interesting about this parable is that those whom one expects to be the most compassionate and helpful—the religious man and the religious official—are in fact the least. The Samaritan is the hero of this story, and our ideal: fully attentive, helpful, and compassionate toward the plight of others. But here is an interesting question: was the Good Samaritan helpful and compassionate because he had nothing else better to do, because someone did something kind for him earlier that day (e.g., treated him to lunch), or because he is a compassionate person—that is, he has the virtue of compassion? Here is a further question: can we expect the Good Samaritan to help others consistently because of his good character, or was this kind act a rare occurrence?

There is an old debate between social and personality psychologists. Personality psychologists hold that one can predict and explain behavior by appeal to personality traits, while social psychologists, or situationists, hold that features of social situations offer the best predictions and explanations for behavior. To support their claims, situationists conducted hundreds of studies from the 1920's to the 1980's, all of which highlight how situational features influence our behavior in unexpected ways. One of the most famous, the Princeton Theological Experiment, uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to demonstrate that helping behaviors largely depend on situational features, and not one’s general character, level of compassion, religious beliefs, or even familiarity with tales such as the Good Samaritan.

The recent revival of virtue ethics rekindled and recast this debate in terms of the existence and causal efficacy of character and virtue for moral behavior. Situationists argue that research in social psychology demonstrates that virtues, as psychological traits, are not stable and consistent and do not enable us to behave morally in the face of situational influences. Virtue ethicists counter that such studies merely show instances of moral failure—which is to be expected given that few persons are perfectly moral. Widespread moral failings do not challenge the moral psychology presupposed by virtue ethics, but rather, indicate the need for moral education through the continual cultivation of virtue. John Doris, one of the most well-known situationists, agrees that situationist research highlights moral failings, but argues that moral education should focus on situational features instead of cultivating
virtue. I argue that the concept of scripts not only captures the theoretical and empirical insights of virtue ethicists and situationists, but also offers a more sophisticated moral psychology and a better approach to moral education than what is offered by either virtue ethics or situationism.

**RESEARCH IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY—AN EXAMPLE**

Although there are many fascinating studies in the situationist literature, the Princeton Theological Experiment is one of the most interesting. Many individuals that enter the ministry desire to help others, so they are a natural group to study to evaluate helping behaviors. The subjects were told that the purpose of the study was to evaluate vocations and religious education. At the start of the experiment, each subject filled out a questionnaire with her demographic data, religious outlook, etc. Researchers also told the subjects that they would give a short presentation on an assigned topic, and half the subjects were assigned to speak on the parable of the Good Samaritan. After subjects completed the questionnaire, researchers told them that the presentations would take place in a different building. Unbeknownst to the subjects, the researchers divided them into thirds: the first group was told that they were late and needed to hurry (“high hurry” condition), the second group was told that they were right on time (“medium hurry” condition), and the third group was told that they were early (“low hurry” condition). Also unbeknownst to the subjects, researchers planted a confederate who was slumped in a doorway on the path to the second building. The purpose of the study was to evaluate whether subjects would aid someone in need, and to measure which factors, if any, contributed to helping behaviors.

The results of the study are quite interesting. Of the forty subjects, only sixteen stopped to help. Presumably, the subjects assigned the parable of the Good Samaritan would have been thinking about the moral of the story in planning their presentations as they walked, and should have been primed to help. Surprisingly, the content of the talk made no difference: individuals assigned the parable of the Good Samaritan did not help any more than those assigned a different topic. Variance in subjects’ religious views made no difference. Demographic variance made no difference. The only factor that affected helping behavior was the subject’s degree of hurry: 63% of subjects who were told they had extra time stopped to help, while 45% of subjects who were
told they were on time stopped, but only 10% of those who were told they were late stopped to help someone slumped in a doorway. The researchers concluded that the time constraint imposed by the assigned hurry condition (low, medium, or high) explained the subjects’ helping behavior—not their professed religious views, intended vocations, propensity for compassion, or good characters.3

**Moral Failings and Moral Education**

I think most individuals are somewhat shocked that so few subjects stopped to help. After all, we tend to believe that we are, by and large, fairly moral persons, and the principle of helping those in need is instilled in us at a very young age. While we all understand that sometimes there are conflicting moral obligations, what is so unsettling about this study is that subjects who did not stop did not even notify the experimenters that someone needed assistance. One may not be in a position to help another, but it does seem unconscionable to not even notify authorities or send help when one is clearly able to do so.

Virtue ethicists argue that such moral failures indicate the need for moral development through the cultivation of virtue, which is a matter of developing a particular type of character.4 A virtuous person should be consistently compassionate, helping those in need whenever the occasion arises—not merely when it is convenient, when one has time, or when one is so inclined. A virtuous person should also be compassionate generally toward many persons in many situations, whether it is due to unemployment, debilitating disease, or catastrophic hurricanes and earthquakes—and not merely when unfortunate events affect the lives of friends, family, and countrymen. Because she is consistently and generally compassionate, a virtuous person is reliable. We predict how she will behave because we understand her reasons for acting and know that her compassion for others will overcome her personal interests or wavering resolve.

Clearly, this virtuous person is an ideal, but virtue ethicists argue that those who cultivate virtue will become increasingly compassionate and approximate this ideal. Moral exemplars, saints, and sages are few and far between, and the fact that most of us fail to be perfectly moral does not provide reason to question the existence and causal efficacy of virtue. Ordinary persons, even those studying theology, engage in bad habits, fail to recognize moral dilemmas, reason poorly about momentous decisions, adopt poor exemplars to model, and fail to have the courage to follow
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through—even when we know what one should do. One forestalls moral failings by developing robust virtues that are (a) stable through time, (b) consistent across many types of situations, (c) reliably causally effective, and which (d) allow for the prediction and explanation of behavior.

Situationists argue that the virtue ethical approach to moral education is empirically untenable and normatively suspect.\(^5\) Situationist research, they argue, shows that much of our behavior is due to situational features rather than psychological character traits or virtues that are stable through time, generally consistent, or that offer reliable predictions and explanations of behavior. Recall that the assigned time condition—low, medium, or high degree of hurry—was the only factor that affected whether the theological students stopped to help. Although one may grant that some situational features affect our behavior, Doris argues “that seemingly insubstantial situational factors have substantial effects on what people do.”\(^6\) The fact that researchers can manipulate behavior by varying such insubstantial situational factors provides powerful evidence that situational factors produce much of our behavior.\(^7\) If moral failings are due to the effect of seemingly insubstantial factors, like an assigned time condition, then moral behavior may be due to aspects of the situation, such as the social pressure exerted by others. Under public scrutiny, we may behave one way, but without prying eyes, we may behave quite differently.

The upshot of this for moral education, situationists argue, is that one should not cultivate virtue, but develop greater attention to and awareness of situational factors. Harman argues that if situational factors, and not character traits and virtues, produce behavior, then “there is nothing one can do to acquire character traits that are more like those possessed by a virtuous agent.”\(^8\) Regardless of moral ideals, if one cannot develop character traits that produce moral behaviors, then cultivating virtue seems a fool’s errand at best. As Harman notes, if “we know that virtue would require having character traits, how can we aim at becoming a virtuous agent?”\(^9\) At worst, Doris argues that it may yield more unethical behavior. Although one may believe that she is a paragon of virtue, quaffing wine while attending a private dinner at the home of a handsome and flirtatious colleague while one’s spouse is away is a situation loaded with sinfully enticing features.\(^10\) Rather than getting into situations that test our strength of character, and in which we are likely to behave unethically, Doris argues that one should attend to situational factors and perhaps avoid such situations at the outset. If I know that wine impairs my judgment, relying on the strength of my virtue after the
wine starts to flow is almost like informed consent for unethical behavior. Doris argues that “the way to get things right more often...is by attending to the determinative features of situations,” and that “the implication of this is that our duties may be surprisingly complex, involving...a sort of ‘cognitive responsibility’ to attend, in our deliberations, to the determinative features of situations.” Moral education, for Harman and Doris, involves becoming knowledgeable about situational factors that affect behavior, then using that knowledge to avoid the factor or the situation. In the case of my handsome colleague, I should simply decline his dinner invitation. For situationists, one forestalls moral failings by cultivating greater knowledge and avoidance of situational factors.

We are left with two opposing theoretical approaches that offer different empirical claims about moral psychology, and different prescriptions for moral education. Virtue ethicists argue that virtues produce behavior and that one can and should cultivate virtue. Situationists declare that situational factors produce behavior, and that virtues are suspect empirically as psychological traits and morally because of misguided reliance on character. I argue that virtue ethicists are right to insist that “character counts;” although situational factors may have surprising and powerful effects, our behavior depends, in large part, on stable and consistent psychological structures. Situationists are also right to insist that situational factors yield much of our behavior and often spur moral failings. The notion of scripts captures each of these insights, and offers a novel alternative for moral education and development.

**SCRIPTS: COGNITIVE AND WRITTEN**

Although people are often unaware of the vast amount of knowledge on which they rely to perform relatively simple actions, such as navigating a grocery store parking lot, psychologists characterize such contextual and implicit knowledge as *schemata*, or abstract representational cognitive structures that enable complex mental operations such as recall, categorization, comprehension, and learning. Children (and adults) have a remarkable ability to learn the meaning of unfamiliar words from the context in which they are used, which depends on a great degree of implicit knowledge. For example, inferring the meaning of the word “proboscis” to understand the sentence “Elephants use their proboscis to eat, bathe, and manipulate objects” requires (a) knowledge of the other presented concepts, (b) categorization via
relationships between concepts, and (c) an inference as to the meaning of the unfamiliar word. While the above example is static, one’s contextual and implicit knowledge often requires memory, tracking, representation, and measurement in time. Scripts are a form of schemata that encode information, relations, sequences, and processes in events. As such, scripts are implicit and abstract representational knowledge of protocols, procedures, emotions, and behaviors in conversation and events that individuals use to guide their own behavior and to interact with and interpret the behavior of others.

A cognitive script is not a cookie-cutter formula, but an abstraction, or conceptual model, of a general type of event, such as dining at a fine restaurant. A script sets expectations of and standards for (a) sequences (e.g., appetizers are served before the first course), (b) appropriateness (e.g., one does not hurl the undercooked steak at the wait staff), (c) relevance and salience of properties (e.g., a dimly lit and empty restaurant is typically an occasion for romance, not a mugging), (d) roles (e.g., the diner, hostess, waiter, chef, etc.), and (e) behaviors (e.g., statements, questions, and actions typically performed by waiters). A script also (a) enables inferences (e.g., the loud crash was a dropped tray of dishes), (b) evokes emotions (e.g., romance, excitement, or fear), and (c) establishes meaning (e.g., the meaning of candles in a romantic restaurant versus their meaning in an earthquake induced power failure). While fine dining experiences vary, these variances are a consequence of the application of the general model or type to the actual particular circumstances. Given that scripts are abstract and general cognitive models of event types unfolding in time, they structure one’s expectations, emotions, inferences, and interpretations, and enable one to engage with others in complex ways.

Although few people are familiar with the notion of cognitive scripts in psychology, many are quite familiar with the notion of written scripts as performed in movies and plays. Within the arts, a script is a written representation of dialogue, interactions, and relationships between various actors unfolding in time within a given context or scenario. The script not only provides information to the actors about the dialogue, their respective roles, and emotional tone, but also structures their interaction and the plot development. Thinking of moral dilemmas as theatrical scripts or screenplays not only encourages students to think about the characters, their actions, emotions, thoughts, speech, interactions, and consequences in as much detail as a story unfolding in time on a screen, but also provides a concrete way to capture the notion of cognitive scripts in group activities.
Using the notions of cognitive and written scripts, I developed an ethics course for juvenile delinquents. Because the students were juveniles and many had poor reading and writing abilities, I designed a skills-based course using group activities to teach students a heuristic for moral reasoning, expand their natural capacity for sympathy, and develop their ability to identify moral dilemmas. In the scripting activities, I divided students into groups and gave them several cases, such as “You are in a line at a convenience store and the person ahead of you accidentally leaves his wallet on the counter.” Notice that the case is open-ended: students may choose to take the wallet, turn it over to the cashier for safe-keeping, dash out of the store to find the previous customer, etc. The assignment was to write a script for each case, creating a context for the event, a story line, actors and their roles, and specify the dialogue, actions, and interactions of the actors. After writing their scripts, the students performed them for the class. Because the students wrote the scripts, the details reflected their lived experience and made the dilemmas salient. For example, one team included a scene in which police bust a party of underage drinkers and two of the characters are sent to jail.

The writing and performance activities provide an interesting window into and a baseline for the students’ initial cognitive scripts, showing how they conceive of typical roles and behaviors, the kinds of inferences they would make, and what emotional responses and actions they find acceptable. Whereas most of us (I hope!) would give the wallet to the clerk for safe-keeping, or run after the absent-minded shopper, most of the students’ scripts detailed a version of “finders, keepers.” One group had the absent-minded shopper turn just in time to see the thief pocket the money: a confrontation, an assault, gunfire, and a bloodbath ensued. After teaching the students a moral reasoning heuristic, they returned to and revised the initial scripts. The only requirement was that, at some point in the script, at least one actor needed to use the heuristic.

While the degree of change between the initial and revised scripts varied by group, the differences offer a window into changes within the students’ cognitive scripts. Even the group noted above, which had the least change, implemented a scene in which the thief returned for his fallen compatriot. In the initial script, the thief abandoned his compatriot without a thought, but the revised script demonstrated loyalty and care for a dying friend. Although I had hoped for a nonviolent resolution, the relationship between the compatriots became morally salient for the
students. The new salience and moral relevance of this relationship altered the script significantly, forcing changes in the characters’ emotions, behaviors, and interaction.21 Comparing the initial and revised scripts provides an insight into changes in the students’ cognitive scripts, demonstrating the salience of new aspects of the scenario and a new interpretation of the event.

**SCRIPTING SITUATIONS**

The notion of scripts not only captures the theoretical and empirical insights of virtue ethicists and situationists, but also offers a couple of interesting responses to their empirical claims about moral psychology and prescriptions for moral education. Virtue ethicists are right to emphasize that our behavior depends, in large part, on robust psychological structures. While cognitive scripts may be altered, as implicit and abstract representational knowledge structures, they are largely stable through time. Further, because cognitive scripts are implicit knowledge structures or models of general types of situations, they are highly consistent across similar situations and enable us to engage with others even in novel situations. However, as models for general types of situations, they are not consistent across all situation types, and indeed, it would be odd to expect them to be so. As the cognitive structures that undergird our understanding of events, interactions with others, and behavioral protocols, scripts are causally efficacious for behavior. And while we may not be aware of it, we routinely use implicit cognitive scripts to predict and explain the behavior of others. The notion of cognitive scripts captures the virtue ethicists’ insistence on the widespread productive role of psychological structures, yet offers an interesting alternative to accounts of virtue that sidesteps situationists’ objections.

Situationists are right to insist that situational factors yield much more of our behavior than we are aware and often spur moral failings. But scripts introduce a new wrinkle here, because they structure situations. Cognitive scripts structure situations actively by establishing procedures and protocols for action, and passively by providing an interpretive filter that identifies particular situational features as being salient. Because scripts structure situations actively and passively, the causal role that situational features have in some part depends on the nature of the script itself. Some situational features may have a strong causal role because they are not salient, and operate freely below
conscious cognitive awareness—"under the radar." Alternatively, some situational features have a strong causal role because they are highly salient. In the Princeton Theological Experiment, the implicit cognitive script for participating in a study makes being subject to the evaluation of a professional and time constraints highly salient, so it is no surprise that the assigned time condition had a strong effect on behavior. Although the researchers assumed that the content of the Good Samaritan parable would prime helping behaviors, it is also no surprise that the content of the subjects' talk had no effect on their behavior given that the content of a talk in a future event is not part of a present cognitive script. Because scripts structure situations actively, the procedures and protocols of a present script will often override, and render irrelevant, the introduction of content that is not part of the present script. Further, because scripts structure situations passively, situational features of future events will not be salient within the interpretive filter for a present cognitive script. While situationists are right to insist that situational factors yield much more of our behavior than we are aware, the claim is overstated. Because the causal roles of situational factors depend in part on cognitive scripts and the structure of events, situational factors have less independent force than situationists tend to argue.

By offering a more sophisticated moral psychology, the notion of scripts grounds a better approach to moral education. Because cognitive scripts are psychological structures that are (a) stable through time, (b) consistent across relevantly similar situations, (c) reliably causally effective, both actively and passively, and (d) allow for the prediction and explanation of behavior, they capture the important causal role of psychological structures in development and action. Virtue ethicists are right that moral education is principally a matter of psychological development, but rather than cultivating virtues as psychological traits, moral education can serve to refashion and refine implicit cognitive scripts as knowledge structures. Although, as described above, I used written and performed scripts as teaching tools, other teaching tools and methods may serve the same educational purpose. Situationists are right that moral education should focus attention on the features of situations, but teaching students about situational factors to help them minimize moral failings through avoidance is insufficient for moral education. An important purpose of moral education is to change how students view the world and act in it, which involves teaching students to attend to and alter their cognitive scripts. Altering scripts would do more than just structure actions within the situation, but would also affect how one
interprets, feels, and thinks about the situation at hand. An important part of moral education is learning to script situations.

ENDNOTES

1 I would like to thank audience members at the University of Minnesota-Duluth and the Western Michigan University for valuable questions and engaging discussion, and Elaine Englehardt, Michael Pritchard, Bruce Waller, Sean Walsh, and anonymous reviewers for insightful suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper.

2 Darley and Batson (1973).

3 There is a great deal of debate [for example, see Miller (2003), Sreenivasan (2002)] surrounding how to understand the actions of the subjects and how to interpret the results of this and other situationist research, and I have similar concerns. However, in this paper, my focus is on how to minimize moral failings through moral education.

4 For the most part, the following is Doris’s characterization of virtue ethics (1998, 2002). Although the debate is beyond the scope of this paper, some virtue ethicists object to this characterization [for example, see Kamtekar, 2004; Kristjansson (2008), Kupperman (2001)], while others would grant it as a general description [for example, see Hursthouse (1999) Merritt (2000), Slote (2001), Wielenberg (2006)]. I accept this characterization for the sake of the argument, because I think it offers insights about moral psychology captured by virtue ethics, rather than fodder for objections.


7 Harman explains that “aspects of a particular situation can be important to how a person acts in ways that ordinary people do not normally appreciate, leading them to attribute certain distinctive actions to an agent’s distinctive character rather than to subtle aspects of the situation” (2003, p. 91).


12 Harman (1999) suggests that one should attend to situational factors and structure situations in one’s personal as well as public life, which has interesting implications for public policy.

13 Rumelhart (1980).

15 For examples, see Schank & Abelson, 1977; Abelson, 1981; and Schank, 1980.

16 For examples, see Fehr et al. (1999), Gioia and Poole (1984), Greenberg et al. (1998), Greenwood et al. (2000), Hoffman, (2001), and Wenzel and Holt (2003).

17 The ethics course was part of the Mahoning County Juvenile Justice Center programming in Youngstown, Ohio. I taught one course to male students in the detention center who were alleged “violent offenders,” meaning that they engaged in some level of assault or used a weapon. I taught a second course to male students that were released from the detention center and remanded to a day-reporting program. These students were considered “high risk” for disciplinary problems, drug use, etc.

18 My focus in this paper is on the use of scripts as part of moral education and the implications of this approach for the debate between situationists and virtue ethicists. For more information about the use of scripting activities as a part of moral education and course design, please see Mower (2008) and Mower (2009).

19 It should be no surprise that the class with the alleged “violent offenders” wrote much more anger and violence into their scripts than the “high-risk” students.


21 For a detailed discussion of the induction of emotion and motivational force through scripts, see Hoffman (2001).

22 For example, see Isen and Levin (1972). The contingent consequence of finding a dime has no part in any particular script, and may have its effectiveness precisely because it operates completely at the implicit and non-cognitive level of mood.

23 Moral education involves not only teaching students to become aware of and alter scripts, but also teaching them which scripts are appropriate and developing moral perception—normative and empirical topics far beyond the scope of this paper.

REFERENCES


