VIRTUE ETHICS AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Since the growth and increasing centrality of virtue ethics in the last few years, there have been some attacks on it, mostly in the interests of other ethical approaches, usually consequentialism. I shall look in turn at three of these attacks. The first claims that virtue ethics makes crucial use of an assumption which is false – namely, that we have character traits. The second claims that virtue ethics is, at some level, egoistic, and thus unfitted to be a proper ethical theory. The third claims that virtue ethics is bound to be ethically and socially conservative, and thus, again, not really fitted to be a proper ethical theory. These three attacks don't all come from the same quarter, and are of differing strengths. They all have in common that they rest on a misunderstanding of what virtue ethics is, and showing the mistakes on which these three attacks depend is useful in that cumulatively it enables us to build up a unified picture of virtue ethics. This is useful, not least because there is currently a lot of confusion, among both supporters and detractors, as to what virtue ethics is, and some principled answer may lead to advance in the discussion, even if not everyone agrees with it.

How could it be false that we have character traits? We take people to be kind, cruel, honest, unreliable, cowardly and so on. This way of thinking of others and ourselves is deeply rooted in everyday talk, most fiction and any realistic ethical theory. Recently, however, some philosophers have taken up a line of thought in social psychology, 'situationism', which purports to show that this is all mistaken. 'Folk morality' is just as wrong as 'folk physics' is, and in both cases scientists can show us our mistake. Ross and Nisbett, the authors of a book on situationist social psychology often referred to by philosophers hostile to virtue ethics, say uncompromisingly, 'The relation between lay personology [sic] and a more correct theory of personality is

analogous to the relation between lay and scientific physics'.[1]

Why should we think anything so drastic? According to Harman, '[O]ur ordinary convictions about differences in character traits can be explained away as due to a "fundamental attribution error"'.[2] The error in question is that of explaining an agent's action in terms of a character trait rather than in terms of the relevant situation. The problem is not just that we tend to be too hasty in explaining behaviour in terms of character, ascribing character traits on the basis of insufficient evidence.[3] The problem, according to the situationists, is that it is only our faulty tendency to explain actions in terms of character rather than reaction to situations which underwrites ascriptions of character, for situationist social psychology has shown that we have no basis for these ascriptions, and thus that, 'to put things crudely, people typically lack character.'[4]

If this were true, what impact would it have on virtue ethics? Virtue ethics is, minimally, the position that the virtues form the basis of an ethical theory; not only is it true that people have virtues and vices, this is the central point from which an ethical theory should begin. (Theories which recognize the existence of virtues, but give them a trivial role in, for example, a consequentialist framework, do not count as virtue ethics. I cannot fully argue the point here, but I think that it is in any case widely recognized.) Now whatever else virtues are, they are at least character traits, dispositions to act, think and feel in certain ways, which are taken by the agent to be the way they are, their character. If our belief that we and others have characters is wrong, then virtue ethics is in trouble.

Harman offers the most hostile conclusion: 'Character based virtue ethics may offer a reasonable account of ordinary moral views. But to that extent, these ordinary views rest on error'.[5] Of our thinking in terms of character traits, he says, alarmingly, 'I think we need to get people to stop doing this…..We need to abandon all talk of virtue and character.'[6] (He does not say who 'we' are, nor what means he envisages to 'stop' people thinking in this way.[7])

Harman envisages two kinds of virtue ethics surviving the thought purge. One is a 'virtue ethics without character traits', which he finds in the work of Judith Jarvis Thomson. I shall have nothing further to say about this, since I have no idea what a virtue ethics without character traits could be. The other is the kind of theory defended, in the light of this dispute, by Maria Merritt, and defended on other grounds by Julia Driver.[8] In it, the thought that we do not have character traits is used to push the idea that a virtue is simply a disposition that a person has that tends to benefit others. What forms this will take will vary, obviously, between societies and cultures, so on this view virtues become plastic dispositions formed and re-formed by changing situations. Thus, if situationism poses a real challenge to virtue ethics, only a very reduced kind of virtue ethics survives.

Doris offers a less aggressive view of the impact of situationism on virtue ethics. It makes it, he claims, less plausible as a theory with an empirically supported moral psychology. If situationism is true, then virtue ethics is relying on a moral psychology which appeals to our ordinary discourse, but is proved false by scientists. Virtue ethics can retain its normative claims, but on a weaker basis, since it does claim to rest on a realistic moral psychology, and other forms of ethical theory might appear more attractive to someone impressed by the scientific credentials of situationism.

But even the weaker claims of Doris are threatening to virtue ethics, since a large part of its appeal is the thought that, unlike its competitors, Kantianism and consequentialism, it can give a realistic account of our ethical life. So it is clearly of importance to virtue ethics to see what the claims of situationism actually amount to, and whether they in fact threaten an ethics which makes virtue and character fundamental.

So, what is situationism? Rather surprisingly, Ross and Nisbett, the source of many philosophers' views on this topic, never say what it is. They are writing for psychologists for whom there is already a theoretical tradition

of 'situationism', and so feel no need to explain the notion. It becomes fairly clear, however, that they distinguish the person, the alleged possessor of character traits, from the situation in which the person acts, as explanatory factors in the person's action. We focus on the action and ask what explains it, the person's alleged character trait or the situation. Focussing on the person's character turns out, it is claimed, to be backing the wrong horse.

What, however, is a situation? We are left to get an idea from several psychological experiments which have become favourites with philosophers drawing from this literature. One is the infamous Milgram experiments. Faced by the experimental situation, the subjects did as they were told, even when told to do horrendous things. Another is an experiment by Darley and Batson, where Princeton University theological students were put into the situation of going to give a lecture and found on the way an actor pretending to be in distress. The only constant in the ways they responded was the degree to which they were in a hurry. [9] (Another experiment frequently referred to, though not by Ross and Nisbett, is one by Isen and Levin in which an actor dropped papers in front of an unsuspecting subject making a phone call, where there either was, or was not, a dime in the phone's coin return slot. Whether the person helped correlated with whether there was a dime in the slot.[10]) A situation, then, is an event with features to which a person is (or is not) sensitive at a particular time and place; this is supported by Ross and Nisbett's comments about 'the power of the situation – the power of particular situational features'.[11] The situation is defined by the presence or absence of a dime in the coin return slot, or the degree to which subjects were manipulated into being in a hurry or not when they passed the actor feigning distress, or, in the Milgram experiments, by the fake set-up in which the subjects were manipulated into believing that they were taking part in a scientific experiment. This is, I suppose, a fairly intuitive idea of what a situation is. When we explain an action, we have two factors to work with: the character the agent brings to the situation, and the effect on the agent of the particular situation; it is this latter which has the 'power' to affect the agent.

Things, however, are not so simple. Ross and Nisbett discuss the nineteenth centuryAmerican prejudice against Irish immigrants as having certain character-traits. These traits, they claim, for example attitudes to work, have to be understood, they say, not in terms of character but against the immigrants' background and the entire pattern of rural Irish life. While their analysis seems right, it is interesting that they appear to be claiming that behaviour of people in urban America should be understood in terms not of character traits but a situation - a situation, however, which is in the past, in rural Ireland.[12] Do we have a situation which influences people to whom it is present neither temporally nor spatially? What Ross and Nisbett appear to mean is that the previous situation has already had its effect, via a specific culture which continues to operate as a substantial dispositional influence in the person, even after the situation which gave rise to it is no longer present. This gives us a contrast between alleged character traits on the one hand, and the effects of culture on the other. But, since culture is working in and through the person's dispositions, in the absence of the original situation, it is unclear what has happened to the contrast between person and particular situation.[13]

Ross and Nisbett do not seem to have a single clear thesis in mind, and so it seems sensible to focus on those philosophers who have taken up situationism as a weapon against virtue ethics, for they have a clearer thesis, and a clearer view of how and why it might be a disadvantage to virtue ethics if we really are making fundamental mistakes when we take ourselves and others to be loyal, honest or brave. (Or, of course, cowards, creeps, or finks.)

Merritt, following Doris, characterizes situationism as follows: 'Situationism challenges the belief that the behavioral consistencies we encounter in others and ourselves are accurately explained by the attribution of robust personal traits, such as friendliness, aggressiveness, generosity and honesty.

To conceive of a personal disposition as a robust trait is to expect that it will reliably given rise to the relevant kind of behavior, across the full range of situations in which the behavior would be appropriate, including situations that exert contrary pressures. For example, to attribute to someone a robust trait of generosity is to expect him to give freely of his attention and resources, when doing so is an action reasonably available to him and will do someone else significant good in proportion to what it costs him.

The expectation is that relatively arbitrary factors, such as whether the 'generous' [sic] person is in a good mood, whether he is in a hurry, or whether anyone else is around, will have minimal impact on his appropriate performance of generous actions. But in the results of experimental studies, generous behavior is most consistently correlated with precisely such ethically arbitrary situational factors. The general thesis of situationism is that in reality, personal dispositions are highly situation-specific, with the consequence that we are in error to interpret [sic] behavioral consistencies in terms of robust traits. The preponderance of evidence drawn from systematic experimental observation, situationists say, supports the conclusion that individual behavior varies with situational variation in ways that familiar concepts of robust traits fail dismally to register.'[14]

Note that in this and all the related philosophical literature I have read, we are made to see character traits from the point of view of a scientific observer. A robust character trait is seen as an entity in terms of which we predict behaviour in terms of probability; it is a disposition to produce behaviour, where behaviour does not include what the person says by way of giving reasons and the like.[15] Now one worry that arises at the start is that this can hardly be the way we understand our own dispositions; I don't discover my own generosity or the lack of it by doing correct or faulty probability calculations. Although it is never brought out into the open and discussed, some of the relevant literature here seems to be assuming that the scientific attitude of interpreting the behaviour of others has a kind of obvious and unquestionable authority, such that it does not matter that it fails to take into account sources of information such as the agent's own account of her actions.

I think this is relevant to the fact that some of the psychologists and philosophers take their account to be a deflationary one, and it complicates the issue of answering them, since some of them take themselves to have explained away, and therefore to be excused from discussing, facts about character and practical reasoning that we appeal to. Harman gives a clear example of this. Nafsika Athanassoulis (2000) argues against him by pointing out that character is built up over time. Thus the Milgram experiments, for example, show that people are capable of behaving badly, but in themselves prove nothing about lack of <u>character</u> in particular, as opposed to other ways of going wrong. In his response Harman just claims that there are no character traits. How is this any kind of response to Athanassoulis' point? Harman must be assuming that he is excused from arguing about character traits, because there are none, since social psychology has failed to produce evidence for them – two rather startling inferences.[16]

To make the dialectic clear: in what follows I take it that this attitude is simply begging the question, and that situationists are not entitled to evade discussing, for example, the question of whether they have given an acceptable account of practical reasoning, on the grounds that they have explained the relevant phenomenon away, so that there is nothing to discuss. Only those who have a knee-jerk deference to science (or, more accurately, to claims to be scientific) would find such an attitude satisfactory.

There are two ways of approaching the situationist challenge to virtue

ethics. One is to argue that the situationists are wrong in their claims about character traits generally, and thus, indirectly, wrong about virtue, since virtues are a kind of character trait. I shan't be doing this, in part because I'm not presupposing acquaintance with the psychological literature, in part because it has been done in a number of recent papers, by Gopal Sreenivasan, Rachana Kamtekar and Christian Miller. Here I shall just mention a few of their points. Firstly, the psychological results are more fragile than philosophers tend to assume. The dime-in-the-slot experiments, for example, when repeated, produced entirely different results. Secondly, even if we don't question the data, there are still methodological problems. The experimenters do not take account of the subjects' own interpretation of the relevant situation; people are described as 'doing the same thing' who would construe what they do very differently. Any reasoning that people bring to the situation is ascribed to the effect on them of the situation, not, as would be more reasonable, to differences in character. And in general the psychologists seem to be working with a model in mind like that of aggression – a broad, stable habit of response which is unreflective and can be predicted over a wide range of situations. The psychologists end up ascribing so much to the power of situations because they have come to the experiment with a notion of character as an unreflective habit of sterotypical response.

I shall be approaching the issue from a different direction. I shall look in some detail at virtue, as that figures in virtue ethics, and ask what, if any, impact situationism could have on it. When we look at one aspect of what virtue is we can see what we can expect from an analysis which sharply distinguishes character from situation as alternative sources of explanation for what the virtuous person does.

The account of virtue I shall give is the kind which is nowadays called 'Aristotelian', since it follows the lines of the account of virtue which we find most clearly set out in Aristotle, though it is wrong to think of it as particularly Aristotelian, rather than an account which underlies all of ancient eudaimonist theory, and for convenience I shall call it the classical account. I am drawing from this tradition because I am concerned to show what virtue is like in an ethics of virtue, and the ancient theories are the best examples we have. This is not because they are ancient, or by famous people, but simply because we have a large amount of material from a tradition which lasted hundreds of years, was developed in a variety of ways and refined by extensive argument and debate. Modern theories of 'virtue ethics' have not yet achieved anything like such a critical mass of theory and argument, and this is one reason why they have developed in sometimes odd and conflicting ways. Of course it is open to anyone to claim that the following is not a correct account of virtue, but if we are asking what virtue is, it is perverse to refuse to look at the classical tradition for an answer.[17]

A virtue is a disposition or state; this is common to all classical accounts of virtue, and it seems a reasonable intuitive claim. For if someone is generous, say, that is a condition of his character, and that is just to say that it is true of him that he is, dispositionally, generous. Thus, the generous person is reliably and habitually generous. It is important, though, that a virtue is not a habit in the sense in which habits can be mindless; it is not a source of actions within the agent which bypasses the agent's practical reasoning. This is because it is a disposition to act, where this means, not that it is an entity in the agent productive of behaviour, but that it is the agent's disposition to act in a certain way (and not others). This is because a virtue, unlike a mere habit, is a disposition to act which is exercised in and through the agent's practical reasoning. This point is brought out by the way Aristotle calls it a disposition concerned with choice or decision (hexis proairetike). It is a disposition which is built up as a result of making choices, rather than a causal build-up within the agent of the effects of past actions. The difference here can be illustrated by the difference between being habitually honest on the one hand, and biting your nails, or always going back to check that the door is locked, on the other. Further, a virtue is a disposition exercised in making choices. When the honest person decides not to take something to which she is not entitled, this is not a reflex, or the predictable causal upshot of a habit, but a decision, a

choice which endorses and strengthens her virtue of honesty.

The exercise of the agent's practical reasoning is thus essential to the way a virtue is exercised and the way it is built up. This shows us why Driver and Merritt end up with a reduced conception of virtue, which has virtually nothing in common with classical virtue ethics. They take a virtue to be merely a disposition which it's good for you to have from other people's point of view, without the need for any intellectual commitment on your part. Driver calls the classical position 'intellectualist' and rejects it on the grounds that it is 'elitist'. 'Virtue must be accessible,'[18] she says, and thinks that an account of virtue which requires it to operate through the agent's practical reasoning is elitist, since most people aren't capable of this. This seems an odd objection to me; surely it is more elitist to deny that most people are capable of the reasoning required to be virtuous? I see no reason to deny this, and so no sense in which virtue ethics is elitist.

What role does the agent's practical reasoning play? Virtue is the disposition to do the right thing for the right reason, in the appropriate way – honestly, courageously, and so on. This involves two aspects, the affective and the intellectual.

The affective aspect of virtue brings in the point that the agent may do the right thing and have a variety of feelings about it. She may hate doing the right thing, but do it anyway; have to struggle with her feelings to do the right thing; do the right thing effortlessly and with no internal opposition; and so on. Now within virtue ethics there is a variety of options on this. Classical virtue ethics always holds that doing the right thing without contrary inclination is a mark of the virtuous person, as opposed to the one who is merely self-controlled, but different theories hold differing positions on the form this takes. Kantian ethics famously diverges from classical virtue ethics in holding that virtue is a kind of strength of will to do the right thing regardless of your feelings. These are important disputes, but I think that discussing them is not necessary to develop the point at hand, namely an account of virtue

adequate to show whether situationism does or does not damage it. For these purposes what is crucial is the account virtue ethics requires of practical reasoning, so while we should remember that this will also require some specific account of the way the agent's feelings and emotions come in, we need not focus on this for present purposes.

So what is the intellectual side of virtue? The virtuous agent doesn't just do the right thing, she does it for the right reason – because she understands that this is the right thing to do. And she does this dispositionally – she has a character such that she understands on each occasion what the right thing to do is. How is this understanding built up?

In classical virtue ethics, the picture is the following:

We start our moral education by learning from others, both in making particular judgements about what is right and wrong, and in adopting some people as role modls or teachers. At first, as pupils, we adopt these views because we were told to, or they seemed obvious, and we acquire a collection of moral views which are fragmented and accepted on the authority of others. Thus, our moral views may be a mess, and contain inconsistencies and gaps. The purpose of good moral education, however, is to get the pupil to think for himself about the content of what he has been taught. Ideally, then, the learner will begin to reflect for himself on what he has accepted, will detect and deal with inconsistencies, and will try to unify his judgements and practice in terms of wide principles which explain the practice and thus enable him to explain and justify the particular judgements he makes. This is a process which cannot occur overnight, because it requires experience and practice. It is a process which requires the agent at every stage to use his mind, to think about what he is doing and to try to achieve understanding of it.

To take an example which I have frequently used: in many societies the obvious models for courage are masculine, indeed macho ones, and focus on sports or war stories and movies. A boy may grow up thinking that these are the paradigmatic contexts for courage, and have various views about courage

and cowardice which take this for granted. But if he reflects about the matter, he may come to think that he is also prepared to call people in other, quite different contexts brave – a child struggling with cancer, someone standing up for an unpopular person or opinion in high school, and so on. Further reflection will show that the limited, macho grasp of courage was limited and isolated, and will drive him to ask what links all these very different cases of bravery. As he comes to understand what bravery is, he becomes more critical of the views that he first was taught, or found obvious, and modifies or rejects some of his original judgements and attitudes.[19]

This development of ethical knowledge proceeds like the acquisition of a practical skill or expertise. As Aristotle says, becoming just is like becoming a builder. There is something to learn in a practical skill, which can be conveyed by teaching. But the expert is the person who comes to reflect on and understand what she has been taught, and to think for herself about it. Of course, in modern discussion about ethical knowledge there is bound to be an instant reaction to the idea of ethical expertise.[20] But what is under discussion here is the way that practical reasoning figures in a virtue, and in the classical virtue ethics tradition the answer is that it is analogous to the way practical reasoning figures in the practice of a practical expert. We are all familiar with the point that there are expert mechanics, plumbers and so on. What makes them experts, rather than learners, is that they understand what they do. They do not mechanically follow the rule-book, but approach each new challenge in a way informed by long practice, but sensitive to the particular demands of the situation, and ready to respond in creative ways to unfamiliar challenges. We want our practical experts to have learned from experience and practice, but we do not expect them to have developed a routinized habit that produces predictable outcomes whatever the nature of the individual challenges; if we find that our plumber or mechanic does have such a routinized habit, we realize that she is not an expert, since she lacks understanding of what she is doing. (And we go to another.)

The above has necessarily been very brief and compressed, and I would need a fuller exposition to bring the position out fully. But what matters for present purposes is that the practical reasoning which virtue requires is active and critical, a search for understanding of what we are doing which is like that which leads to mastery of expertise in other types of practical reasoning.

By this point it has become obvious that we are working with a notion of reason which has been excluded from many modern discussions of ethics, and also from much modern work in psychology. For this is, precisely, <u>practical</u> reason, the reasoning which is exercised in <u>doing</u> something or <u>making</u> something. It is quite obviously not the notion of reason common in modern discussions and often labelled 'Humean', according to which reason is itself not practical, but merely works out the means to an end, and ends are set by desire, which functions independently of reason. I don't intend to argue against this conception here, but merely to make a methodological point. Sometimes modern philosophers write as though the 'Humean' account of reasoning simply gave an account of the way we actually reason, and if you think that, then an account of practical reasoning of the sort implied in classical virtue ethics is going to look overblown, extravagantly claiming for reason the function of desire, namely to lead to action. But this is a mistaken account of the matter. <u>Both</u> the 'Humean' account and what I shall call the classical account of practical reasoning, which takes the basic model to be that of a practical skill, are <u>theoretical</u> accounts of what reason is and how it works. Neither can claim to be the, or even the best, account of how we actually reason in practice. As in many other fields, the actual way we reason is imperfect and underdetermines the best theory of it. The classical theory is empirically better supported than the 'Humean' one in that it does give a good account of many areas of practical expertise for which the 'Humean' account is pretty unconvincing.[21] But they are both theoretical accounts of practical reasoning. So it would be bad methodology to assume the truth of the 'Humean' account and fancy that this constitutes a criticism of the classical account of practical reasoning.

Virtue, then, is a disposition to which, as has been stressed, the agent's

practical reasoning is essential. And that practical reasoning, as we have seen, has a form whose model is that of a practical expertise. We've also seen that the practical expert has understanding of what she does, and the same goes for the virtuous person.

One point is obvious by now, but needs to be brought out explicitly. Practical expertise, including the understanding of the virtuous person, is highly situation-sensitive. It is only the absolute beginner who does what he does because he has been told to do so, or is copying the expert, and who acts in a way which is not sensitive to the specific demands of the situation. As soon as he develops understanding of what he is doing, he brings to each situation an understanding of what he should do which has been built up by practice, but is active and responsive to what needs to be done now, in this situation. When you take your car to the garage, you know that the mechanic has built up, by practice, an understanding of car repair. But you don't expect that understanding to produce a response to your car's woes that could be predicted before he looked at the car. Such a response is possible, but would show that he didn't understand what he was doing. The expert's understanding is exercised in a decision which displays his response to this particular situation. That's the difference between an expert and someone who acts out of mere habit, or the force of repeated mindless practice.

Similarly for virtue. Virtue is a reliable disposition, but because it is a disposition built up from and exercised in choices, it is always sensitive to change and to the new demands of each situation. If it weren't, it wouldn't be virtue, but mere habit. Aristotle says that the virtuous person acts from a settled and unchangeable disposition, and this is frequently misunderstood. Aristotle doesn't mean that the virtuous person ploughs on regardless of what new situations offer by way of challenge.[22] The virtuous person will not shift from being honest just because a big temptation offers, for example; she is reliably honest. But she continues to be sensitive to different situations and to judge them in a way that responds to the particularities of the situation. If I may quote my earlier work, here are some sentences from The Morality of

Happiness:

'Far from giving us a rigid picture of the moral life, this [account of virtue as a disposition] emphasizes the way that our moral life is always in a process of development. Everything we do reflects the way we have acted and affects the way we will act. We are all the time faced with new and complex situations; how we deal with them reveals what we have become and affects what we are becoming. Even the stably honest person develops every time she acts honestly; every honest action reflects a determination to continue as she is, a determination that could be undermined by unfamiliar or complicated circumstances. If her honesty is indeed unchangeable, this results not from lack of thought but precisely from continual thought about her honest actions.'[23]

Let us return to the situationists' objections to virtue. They think of virtue as a robust character trait with outcomes that are putatively predictable independently of the situations in which the character trait leads to actions. Thus Doris describes the attempt to become virtuous as 'striving to develop characters that will determine our behavior in ways significantly independent of circumstance'.[24] We can by now see, however, that this is never what a virtue is, for two reasons. A virtue is not an entity in me determining my behaviour; it is the way I am, my disposition to decide. And a virtue is a disposition to respond to situations in an intelligent and flexible way, not a stubborn habit of acting that is indifferent to circumstances. Doris demands that '[W]e should be able to predict, with a high degree of confidence, how the virtuous person will behave in any particular situation in which we find them'[25] and he seems to understand this as an attempt to predict how a rigid, situation-indifferent habit will display itself in a range of situations. (And how, incidentally, are we supposed to know antecedently what the relevant range of situations is?)[26] But virtue is a disposition to decide, in a way that has been built up through both experience and intelligent habits of choosing and coming to understand the values involved. So we are only likely to be able to predict accurately the response of the virtuous person if we can match

her level of practical understanding.

Compare the demand that, if our plumber is any good, we ought to be able to predict how she will fix <u>any</u> leak we find her dealing with. Should we expect to be able to predict this? (If we can, why do we need her services?) Obviously this is a completely unreasonable demand. Unless we have as much understanding of plumbing as she does, and comparable experience, it's only reasonable to expect our predictions of what she will do to be hit and miss. Similarly, why should we expect people indifferent to honesty to be any good at predicting the exact response of an honest agent? And in general, how can we expect to make any prediction of what the virtuous person will do unless we have some understanding of the way she is thinking – and we have seen how complex that is. When we have no background knowledge of a person, and in particular know nothing whatever about her views on honesty in various different kinds of circumstance, how could we expect to foresee accurately what she will do?[27]

Since virtue is not a rigid habit, close attention to situations and their contexts is required, not excluded, by it. Doris gives an example where a colleague invites you for dinner when your spouse is absent, and an attempt at seduction is clearly in the offing. Only the situationist, he thinks, will have the intelligence to avoid the dinner at the outset; the person who relies on character feels 'secure in the knowledge of [their] righteousness' and goes along – only for it to be probable that their reliance will turn out to be misguided. Doris misses the point that the virtuous person would have an intelligent understanding of what fidelity requires, and would do just what Doris says the situationist would do. Only somebody clueless about what virtue required would rely on the force of habit alone.

In fact, when Doris tells us that we should focus on situations and the complexities they raise, he is, unawares, telling us just what virtue ethicists tell us. When he says that our duties are surprisingly complex, and that we have a responsibility to think about the background and 'determinative fea-

tures' of situations, rather than waiting till the situation confronts us, his advice is not all that far from the advice to develop character by intelligent choice. When he tells us, 'We should try..to avoid "near occasions for sin" – morally dangerous circumstances. At the same time, we should seek near occasions for happier behaviors – situations conducive to ethically desirable conduct',[28] he is in close agreement with Aristotle's advice in <u>Nicomachean Ethics</u> II 8-9 (except that Aristotle does not have the idea of sin).[29] A virtue ethicist can happily take on board all Doris' points about the importance of responding intelligently to situations. Doris only thinks that this is an <u>alternative</u> to a virtue ethics approach because he makes the mistake of taking a virtue to be a rigid habit functioning independently of circumstances.

This may be in part because, in common with other situationists, Doris underestimates the intellectual component of virtue. Although he does realize that virtue need not be exhausted by acting, and that the virtuous person's thoughts can also be relevant, he interprets such an 'intellectualist' account of virtue in a strange way. Despite quoting Aristotle on firmness of character, he ignores the extensive material on the role of practical reason in virtue in Aristotle and the whole classical tradition. The only form of intellect he allows to play a role in virtue is a 'way of seeing', an interpretation taken from John McDowell, which he interprets as the virtuous person having a 'perceptual capacity' to see things in a certain way. Leaving aside the question of whether this is a proper way to interpret McDowell, this makes the virtuous person into a passive spectator of situations. As we have seen, the real role of intellect in virtue is a far more active and critical one. The virtuous person not only judges what is the right thing to do, he does this from understanding, something which enables him to criticize the judgements he originally started from, and to explain and give reasons for the judgements he makes. He does this in the light of an understanding of his life as a whole and the workings of both the virtue in question and other virtues to which the situation is relevant. This complex operation of practical reasoning is what underlies the point that virtue is not a rigid habit, and the point is left unmet as long as the 'intellec-

tualist' side of virtue is taken to be merely a passive way of seeing.[30]

A possible situationist response could be that the objection to virtue does not hold against the classical or 'Aristotelian' forms of virtue ethics, in which it is essential that there is active exercise of practical reasoning in a way responsive to situations. The objection will hold only against what I have called reduced forms of virtue, in which the agent's reasoning matters less or not at all, and which can reasonably be taken to be rigid habits of action of the kind the situationist attacks. However, all the situationists I have read have taken themselves to be attacking Aristotle, and so I don't know how they would react to this suggestion.

It is this same failure to appreciate the intellectual structure and content of virtue which also explains some of the more specific objections to virtue ethics that are to be found in the situationists. Harman objects that virtue ethics cannot be applied in a useful way. It is objectionable, he says, to hold that what one ought morally to do in a given situation is what a virtuous person would do in that situation. For sometimes a non-virtuous person will be in a situation that a virtuous person would never be in.[31] I ought to apologize, for example, for wrongdoing, but the virtuous person wouldn't have done wrong in the first place. Again, compare the thought, 'I should play this piece the way an expert piano player would do it. But wait! – An expert piano player wouldn't be playing Fur Elise in a school concert. So the advice is useless.' The analogy is surely clear. Asking what the virtuous person would do in my situation is just asking what I should do, in my situation, if I am to at least try to be brave, or fair, or whatever. The virtuous person functions as an ideal I aspire to, either overall or in respect of a particular virtue, of trying to improve.

This point itself, however, has been found objectionable by situationists. Two sorts of objection have been found to the idea that the virtuous person is an ideal. One is that situations can be thought up where the action appropriate to the virtuous person would be inappropriate for the non-virtuous, and vice versa.[32] These have already been dealt with; they ignore the point that becoming virtuous requires the development of your practical understanding, so that aspiring to the ideal is just requiring you to improve your practical understanding, in your situation, as much as you can.

The other kind of objection[33] is that if virtue ethics requires ordinary deliberators to pursue an ideal of virtue, then it becomes liable to a difficulty more commonly held to afflict its rivals, namely 'theoretical mediation'. This is the worry that instead of basing itself in a realistic way on the ways in which we do ordinarily deliberate, virtue ethics instead imports an ideal which we have to bear in mind as we deliberate, and to which we are urged to conform our thinking. If this is how it works, it looks uncomfortably like consequentialism, which, rather than starting from the way we think, imports a totally foreign ideal, and then tells us to transform our ordinary deliberations in the light of it.[34] However, virtue ethics is not liable to this objection, and showing why it is not, shows also why it is misleading to approach it with the preconception that as a theory it must be <u>either</u> 'descriptive-psychological' <u>or</u> 'aspiring to an ideal', as though these were exclusive alternatives.

The reason is, once more, the centrality to virtue of practical reasoning. Virtue ethics begins from the judgements we do make, in our societies, and the people we do admire. Where else are we to begin from?[35] But virtue requires that we think rigorously and critically about the judgements we make, their sources and their justifiability. We have to unify and scrutinize our deliberations, and come to understand why we make them. We approach an ideal of virtue from within deliberations that start from actual life.[36] Thus, an ideal of virtue is not something brought in from outside the aspiring person's deliberations, as, for example, the maximization of utility is. Once you get the point that <u>you</u> have to seek reasons for the judgements you make, and the kind of person you are making yourself into, rather than uncritically relying on the attitudes of others, you are on the way to aspiration to an ideal of virtue. Thus the theory includes both description of how people reason and

what they actually take to be virtuous, and leads to an ideal which people try, imperfectly, to live up to.

Situationists, then, have so misunderstood the classical or Aristotelian kind of virtue ethics that they are attacking, that they have been attacking the wrong target. Moreover, the alternative they recommend is already part of classical virtue ethics itself.

One general moral is clear from the situationist debate. Virtue ethics, at least the classical sort, is not just a theory about reliable dispositions. It includes an account of practical reasoning and its development into practical wisdom, an account which differs a great deal from the accounts often assumed by modern philosophers and psychologists. To attack virtue ethics without taking account of this is to attack the wrong target, or to attack a different target – modern reduced accounts of virtue. And to assume a modern account of practical reasoning, for example the 'Humean' one to attack the classical account is begging the question. What Aristotle, or any representative of the classical approach, says about firmness of character cannot be understood without a corresponding account of the intellectual development of the virtuous person and its similarities to the development of practical skills.[37]

Virtue ethics, then, at least the classical kind, is not yet affected by the findings of modern social psychology. It is not yet clear what the situationists' experiments can show about virtue. And philosophers who have used them to attack virtue ethics have not yet found a target.

(2001), 'Virtue Ethics Without Character Traits', Chapter 6 of <u>Fact and Value</u>, essays on ethics and metaphysics for Judith Jarvis Thomson, ed. A. Byrne, R. Stalnaker and R. Wedgwood, MIT Press, 117-127.

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Merritt, Maria (2000), 'Virtue Ethics and Situationist Personality Psychology', <u>Ethical Theory and Moral Practice</u> 3: 365-383.

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Ross, Lee and Nisbett, Richard E., (1991) <u>The Person and the Situation</u>: Perspectives of Social Psychology. Temple University Press.

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Fundamental Attribution Error,' <u>Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society</u> New Series Vol XCIX, 315-331.

(2000) , 'The Nonexistence of Character Traits', <u>Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society</u> New Series, 223-226.

1 Ross and Nisbett (1991), 161; cf 7-8. The comparison is enthusiastically taken up by Harman (1999). Neither question whether psychology has the same kind of intellectual authority as physics.

2 Harman (2001), 122.

3 Cf. Sreenivasan (2002), p. 54: 'From the fact that people happen to add badly, it does not follow that there are no sums. Likewise with character traits.'

4 Doris (1998), 506.

5 Harman (1999), 327.

6 Harman (2000), 224.

7 The alternative he appears to envisage is that we should produce good consequences by manipulating situations, without, apparently, taking account of the views of the people concerned as to what the situations are, and what consequences are good. This raises even more dramatically the issue of who 'we' are.

8 Driver's version is the more radical; she thinks that virtue does not even require the agent to have good intentions. Merritt weakens the conditions for virtue so that the agent, while still required to have a intellectual grip on the situation, is not required to have 'motivational self-sufficiency'; thus, it is for her compatible with being virtuous that you do and think as you do because of social pressures, which you have not yourself evaluated and committed yourself to.

9 Hence situationists tend to reinterpret the Good Samaritan parable itself, as showing that what we should fault the priest and the Levite for is that they were running late.

10 Doris (1998), 504.

11 Ross and Nisbett (1991), 4.

12 Ross and Nisbett (1991), 193-196.

13 Especially since Ross and Nisbett appear to think that some aspects of the relevant culture are still operative (194-195).

14 Merritt, (2000), 365-366.

15 The literature, both psychological and philosophical, is very unclear on this point.

16 Miller (forthcoming) traces Harman's growingly eliminativist characterization of his position.

17 In what follows I am drawing on the first part of my (1993) and on several of my articles on virtue ethics published since then.

18 Driver (2001), 54.

19 All forms of virtue ethics which stress this role of practical reasoning move to some version of the unity of the virtues. For only a little thought shows that a real understanding of honesty, say, can scarcely be achieved in isolation from understanding the various factors which may interact with, and affect, an agent's honesty. Honest action is not a safely compartmentalized part of the agent's life. Thus, understanding honesty will turn out to require understanding one's life as a whole, and the relevance of many other factors. There is nothing surprising about this if we reflect that the various virtues are all types of virtue, and could scarcely be expected to develop in mutually isolated ways.

20 Though not, apparently, to ethical language being modified or abolished at the dictates of scientific expertise.

21 See my (2001), which develops the classical model of practical knowledge further than there is scope to do here.

22 He also doesn't mean that once you have developed a character you can't change, though this is a frequent misunderstanding. He says at Categories 13 a 22 – 31 that the bad person can slowly change his character by first

acting in a different way, then gradually coming to see the point of it. Character change is difficult, given the amount of practice needed not just to act well but to become a good person, but it is possible if you put in the effort.

23 Annas (1993), 52.

24 Doris (1998) , 515. Cf also 506, where he says that situationists think that 'differing behavioral outcomes' are a function of 'situation variation rather than individual disposition' (emphasis mine).

25 Doris (1998) ,522 n 14.

26 I find it puzzling that situationists find no problem with the idea of our having to know ahead of time 'the full range of situations in which the behavior would be appropriate' (Merritt (2000), 365. What is the 'full range' of situations in which courage is appropriate? It is hard to see how any situation could be excluded. We don't normally think of ice-skating judges as needing courage, but the recent example of the corrupt French judge at the Olympic ice-skating finals shows that courage may be required to assess ice-skating.

27 Some may be worried by an obvious implication of this position, namely that there is no neutral viewpoint from which anyone can judge how a virtuous person would act (or, of course, judge how well various non-virtuous, but aspiring, people would act). This is, however, not a problem for this particular argument, since it is a feature of the account of practical reasoning in any classical virtue ethics. It has recently been brought out and vigorously defended in Hursthouse (1999). Its importance makes it all the more crucial that in this argument the question not be begged by a simple assumption of the truth of a 'Humean' theory of practical reasoning, for which this does not hold.

28 Doris (1998), 517.

29 Aristotle is talking in the context of the mean, but his general points donot depend on it, viz., that we should think ahead intelligently as to how to develop, given our individual proclivities and weaknesses, and that this requires intelligent responsiveness to particular situations.

30 It is rather odd that Doris should describe the position he puts in terms of perception as an 'intellectualist' position at all.

31 Harman (2001), 120.

32 This objection is common to Harman and Doris, but Doris deals with it in a more subtle way. He points out that good advice will require 'the best understanding of our situational liabilities' (Doris 1998, 519). Nothing he says, however, is incompatible with classical virtue ethics.

33 Found in Doris (1998, 520).

34 Of course realism sets in at stage two, when we find that the straightforward acceptance of the ideal is impossible, so that we fall back on doing what we do anyway.

35 This is connected to the point, which I cannot deal with adequately here, that virtue ethics has the advantage of realizing that by the time we think about ethics, we have already grown up and have a life – a social situation, a family, probably a job. Ethical theory, on the classical virtue approach, demands that we think in a better way about ourselves in this context, and that we achieve the ideal from where we are. Thus it has a real advantage over theories that demand, from nowhere in the person's life, that they regard their life and commitments as disposable in the interests of a theory that has no appeal from within that life. See my (2002).

36 This is why (although again there is no time to develop the point here) virtue ethics is not relativist, although different virtues are prized in different societies. We start from our society's virtues (where else?) and after critical deliberation we can ask whether we have different ways of applying the same virtue, or real dispute as to whether some disposition is a virtue.

37 Nor can it be understood without taking into account the way that virtues aim at achieving our final end, eudaimonia, but this much misunder-

stood aspect cannot be considered further here.