

3.2 Situationism and the Pyrrhic Defense of Character Education: Commentary on Sreenivasan

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One of the striking trends in recent moral psychology is the robust dialogue now commonplace between ethical theory and empirical psychology. At least since the regnancy of the Kohlberg paradigm there was always an interest among moral development researchers in appropriating the dominant traditions of ethical theory to define the domain of inquiry. From the other side the naturalizing tendencies sweeping through contemporary philosophy encouraged broader engagement with empirical psychology. This is particularly evident in morality and virtue ethics where there is a widely shared view that the starting point of ethical theory should be the facts of human nature and that reflection on the moral personality should be constrained by some degree of psychological realism (Flanagan, 1991; Johnson, 2014). Hence, psychologists who want to get their ethics right and philosophers who want to get their facts straight encouraged common effort to do empirically responsible moral philosophy and philosophically responsible moral psychology. This volume is one illustration of that effort.

A common effort seems particularly required to sort out the implications of certain social psychology experiments for virtue ethics. The long-standing view that virtues have dispositional properties that organize behavior in consistent ways across even diverse situations has been challenged by interpretations of social psychology experiments that cast doubt on whether anyone has virtues like that. The Harman–Doris take on this literature is that situations trump global dispositions in the prediction and explanation of behavior (Harman, 1999; Doris, 2002). If unchallenged, these findings would undermine the very notion of moral character assumed by virtue ethics, or else a notion of moral character worth having. What could character be without global traits, without global dispositions?

The Harman–Doris thesis forced a very useful and illuminating conversation about the psychological specification of virtues and character (e.g.,

Miller, 2013, 2014). It has provoked a stout and (in my view) effective defense of the traditional claims of Aristotelian virtue ethics (e.g., Flanagan, 2009; Kamtekar, 2004; Sreenivasan, 2002). It encouraged new ways to think about traits as socially mediated constructs (Alfano, 2013) and generated innovative accounts of moral personality that trade on literatures other than trait psychology (e.g., Annas, 2011; Annas, Narvaez, and Snow, in press; Snow, 2010).

Psychologists, for their part, are unaccustomed to the close (and invariably insightful) reading of their literatures by ethicists and empirical philosophers but seem generally nonplussed by the situationist challenge (e.g., Sabini and Silver, 2005). After all, the rapprochement between social and personality psychology was sealed decades ago with more complex models of how dispositions and contexts dynamically interact (Mischel, 1990). Although there are current efforts to document the situational invariance of traits to the advantage of virtue ethics (Jayawickreme and Fleeson, this volume), I am aware of no generalized anxiety among personality or developmental psychologists, or among social psychologists for that matter, concerning the alleged ephemeral nature of personality traits or the vacuity of dispositional coherence.

Order of Battle

But the situationism challenge continues to unnerve virtue ethics. Professor Sreenivasan rallies another response this time to undermine its untoward implications for character education. His defense of Meno Jr.'s character education is at once compelling and decisive but concedes so much along the way that I fear we are left with a notion of moral character that is psychologically barren, and a defense of character education that is Pyrrhic in its victory over the Harman–Doris thesis.

One concession is to settle for a theory of virtue that makes modest empirical claims, for example, that only a few exemplars of virtue possess character traits of sufficient reliability to resist situational influence, or, alternatively, that most of us do not possess traditionally defined virtues. We must accede to this concession, according to Sreenivasan, because situationism is helpless against a virtue theory that makes such modest claims. Of course, an empirically modest virtue theory might encourage greater effort to reach the virtue threshold, to emulate the virtues, to try to acquire the virtuous character trait, if only for the sake of practical relevance. But even this spare retreating remnant of virtue theory is susceptible to rear-guard attack. The situationists will insist that moral strivers have no chance

of reaching the upper thresholds of virtue, a point that Sreenivasan concedes readily, but he concedes also, for good measure, that the lower threshold of virtue is also beyond reach.

One can see in Sreenivasan's concessions a clever trap for situationists. Situationism will be soundly routed if an effective redoubt can be erected for character education while conceding the frontal and rearguard assault on traditional virtue theory. Certain defensive positions against situationists will not work, at least at first blush. Sreenivasan deems "ham-fisted" the traditional Aristotelian view of virtue acquisition (through mere repetition) insofar as it neglects motives. A second model likens virtue acquisition to skill development such as the case of a high jumper learning to clear the bar at more challenging heights using the "Fosbury Flop" technique. Typing is another example. If running at the bar and diving head-first is ham-fisted high jumping, the Fosbury Flop is a more sophisticated technique to clear the bar (if mastered). If hunt-and-peck is ham-fisted typing, more sophisticated touch typing will increase proficiency. Hence the Fosbury model assumes there are sophisticated techniques for acquiring reliably enacted virtues (it also makes other assumptions that will not detain me here).

Both models are susceptible to the same rearguard critique. If we accept the empirical claim that most individuals cannot reach lower thresholds of virtue reliability, then they should not try, and traditional virtue theory is thereby defeated insofar as it has nothing of practical relevance to assert to nonexemplars of virtue (which is just about everybody). Sreenivasan concedes the empirical claim but not the defeat. In the "My First Reply" section, for example, he argues that Meno Jr. should try to follow the ham-fisted Aristotelian model on those occasions where it is possible, permissible, and moral to do so whether he makes it to the threshold or not. In other words, just because one fails to reach the threshold does not mean one should neglect to perform acts of kindness (say) when the occasion arises. Reaching the threshold is not the only reason to follow the ham-fisted model. Individuals have reasons to perform acts of kindness irrespective of whether it brings the threshold of trait reliability into closer reach. This is enough to defeat the rearguard critique insofar as it carves out some practical relevance for traditional virtue theory.

A similar defensive line fortifies the Fosbury model. On Sreenivasan's view there is a continuum of virtue reliability with a lower threshold on one end, a Fosbury break-even point on the other end where a virtue trait is reliably enacted in appropriate circumstances, and in between, a point where Meno Jr. exceeds the lower threshold but falls short of the

break-even point. The situationist might urge Meno Jr. to surrender because he cannot reach the break-even point, but Sreenivasan argues that reaching the lower threshold is enough to save an empirically modest virtue theory from irrelevance. Moreover, it might not even matter, for the sake of practical relevance, whether Meno Jr. reaches any threshold of virtue acquisition. Instead, it is enough to perform (possible and permissible) individual acts of kindness (say) as the occasion demands when it is also moral to do so. In this case acts of kindness flows out of the value of kindness itself, as a *normative act prescription*, rather than out of the virtue of kindness.

This subtle maneuver outflanks the rearguard critique. Certainly there is nothing to gain by waging the battle for virtue theory's practical relevance on terms dictated by situationists. Like a good general who chooses the optimal terrain for battle, Sreenivasan alters the terms of reference for what constitutes a virtue. What if virtue were not a trait but an "occurrent act or state," a behavior exhausted in a slice of time rather than a disposition that is continuously displayed over time (and presumably, situations), and what if occurrent acts correspond one to one with specific normative prescriptions about what the agent should do on the occasion where agent action is possible and permissible? If both conditionals obtain, then it is possible to show how virtues can be sensitive to situations while also having something practically relevant to say to everyone. This disarms the rearguard critique insofar as the Harman–Doris thesis does not apply to nontraditional theories like this.

Sreenivasan then orders a charge to press his rout of Harman–Doris by showing how it is possible, nonetheless, to link up the moral agency envisioned by occurrent act theory (let's call it) to virtuous character traits. Establishing this link would show that traditional definitions of virtue have not been abandoned on the field after all. Hence, occurrent acts prescribed by values count as expressions of virtues if they are the sort of things a model of virtue would do under the circumstance, or, alternatively, if they are the acts that express a certain character trait (e.g., kindness).

The rout is on because an empirically modest theory now has something practical and correct to address to everyone who is not a model of virtue (which is most of us), and this formula accords with a traditional theory of virtue because, as it happens, compliance with act prescriptions issued by kindness is coincident with the (ham-fisted) Aristotelian model of virtue acquisition or else aligns with a model of kindness.

After Action Assessment

It seems probable that once the smoke clears the rearguard harassment of moral character will be suppressed by the combined force of occurrent prescriptive acts and traditional virtue theory as described by Sreenivasan, at least as a matter of strictly philosophical analysis in defense of a traditional virtue theory. As a psychological matter, however, there are needless casualties, and as an educational matter, there seems little cause to embrace the victory. Put differently, reinforcements could be summoned to shore up the cause of *character* education and of character *education*. Let me take up the educational matters first.

On Character Education

For all the effort expended to insure that an empirically modest virtue theory has something of practical relevance to address to everyone who is not already a model of virtue, it is striking that the present defense of character education has little of practical relevance to address to actual character educators. It seems to elide the actual practice of character education that takes place in schools. Moral-character education is a vast enterprise with sprawling literatures and a long history (e.g., Lapsley and Yeager, 2013), and while no one pretends these literatures are without philosophical issues, it is also true that it plows ahead without awaiting a response to situationism's rearguard critique of virtue theory.

Character educators might be puzzled by the concessions made here, for example, that there are thresholds of reliable trait acquisition that most of us do not meet and will not reach. This would not be an easy sell to parents and teachers and to the long tradition of character education in schools. Most parents want to raise children to become persons of a certain kind, persons who possess dispositional qualities that are desirable and praiseworthy, whose personalities are imbued with a strong ethical compass. To say this goal is beyond reach but that children should keep trying anyway, should continue to enact occurrent behaviors as required even though act prescriptions issuing from values would not attach to selfhood as virtues, would be bewildering advice, no matter how well it works as strictly philosophical analysis.

Moreover, the two models of character education held out for analysis would not be recognized by character educators in the form presented here. For example, Aristotelian habituation is portrayed as something ham-fisted in its preoccupation with mere repetition and lack of sufficient motivation. The Fosbury model is described as something incompatible

with traditional virtue theory (or so it seems). I claim no particular expertise in these matters (yet will blunder ahead anyway), but this does not align with a reading of Aristotelian virtue theory that inspires contemporary character education.

Character educators would embrace a conception of traits that builds cognitive-rational capacities into the very fabric of dispositions. The importance of practical reasoning is bound up with Aristotle's definition of virtue: a state of character concerned with choice defined by reference to reason "and in the way in which the person of practical wisdom would determine it" (Aristotle, 1985, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 1107a). The proper display of virtue requires keen attention to situational complexity, "to know the facts of the case, to see and understand what is morally relevant and to make decisions that are responsive to the exigencies of the case" (Sherman, 1999, p. 38). What we see, in other words, depends on *who we are*, it depends on our character, and who we are is not some gaunt cipher who merely performs occurrent acts without a well-stocked armamentarium of cognitive abilities to discern values and judge prescriptions.

So the kind of habituation proper to virtues in the Aristotelian framework is a critical facility; it includes learning how to discern, make distinctions, judge the particulars of the case, and make considered choices. These are dispositions of interpretation (Rorty, 1988). Cognitive psychologists might conceptualize them as schemas, prototypes, and scripts whose accessibility and activation make possible the discriminative facility that allows one to act in ways appropriate to the situation. In other words, proper habituation builds the ability to make situationally sensitive judgments right into the definition of virtue. Even the most modest agent-centered conception of virtue must reference it. There can be no talk of traits without specifying the cognitive carriers of dispositions that make possible agent construal of the moral landscape.

Moreover, the Aristotelian notion of habituation is best understood not as mere repetition but as learning by doing with regular and consistent practice under the guidance and authority of a virtuous tutor (Steutel and Spiecker, 2004). It is not unlike the cultivation of skills or the development of expertise through coached practice. This view has two implications. First, if the cultivation of expertise and skill development is immanent to Aristotelian habituation, there is little need to posit a separate "Fosbury model" of trait acquisition (leaving aside for the moment whether it makes sense to think of personality development in terms of a continua of thresholds and break-even points). Second, the notion that virtue acquisition is a mentored and coached activity readily supplies motivation to

conform behavior to value prescriptions, so says a social cognitive theory of virtue (Lapsley, in press). On this account it is the affective connection to caregivers, teachers, and mentors that provides the motivation for developing a child's wholehearted commitment to morality, to the development of the moral self, and to the requirements of moral character (Kochanska, 2002).

Hence the two models of character education analyzed by Sreenivasan, the ham-fisted Aristotelian and Fosbury models, seem like psychologically thin heuristic devices conjured to dismiss a situationist bogey that does not dismay. Traditional virtue theory has the resources necessary to make psychologically realistic claims about effective character education. It highlights agent construal (virtues require discerning perception and judgment) and a developmental process (virtue requires social cognitive development), it accounts for the relational requirements of character education (involving mentorship), and it provides an account of agent motivation (that derive from the qualities of relationship). It subsumes the Fosbury model insofar as social cognitive development and the development of traits-as-skills become increasingly expert in judgment and application. There is nothing particularly ham-fisted about Aristotle's virtue theory if read like this, and it has the added advantage of making an effective line of communication with contemporary educational and psychological literatures.

On *Character Education*

The defense of character education attempted here is clearly driven by implications of empirical findings in social psychology, a laudatory and welcome engagement that can only advance the lines of interdisciplinary dialogue. Yet at crucial turns it neglects to summon the psychological reinforcements that could press the main line of counterattack. Put differently, social psychology motivates the Harman–Doris critique of traditional virtue theory, to be sure, but the battle lines developed here are not nearly psychological enough, and social psychology should not be the only psychological literature relevant to virtue theory and character education.

Take the matter of what constitutes a trait or trait possession. Although virtues are conceived as occurrent acts in the slice of time (rather than cross-temporal dispositional tendencies), it is not clear how this is to be understood in psychological terms. Treating the work of virtues as occurrent acts does not give sufficient credit to agent construal and seems to give up on dispositional character.

Moreover, character education is not really a matter of meeting all-or-none thresholds where traits must become adhesive and sticky to ensure reliable behavioral manifestation. This is a purely analytical strategy to secure the cross-situational consistency that supposedly attends the acquisition of global traits, but it is a caricature of traits to treat them as static, immutable possessions that are immune to situational influence once some threshold is crossed (Caspi and Shiner, 2006). Indeed, the very distinction between global and local traits is up for debate and is not a secure basis for engaging the situationist challenge.

Modern personality psychology is sometimes said to divide into two disciplines on the question of how best to represent the basic structural units of personality (Cervone, 1991). One discipline focuses on traits as the basic unit of analysis, the second on social cognitive constructs, such as schemas, scripts, prototypes, and the like. My preference is for social cognitive language, but with respect to the dispositional features of personality there is much common ground between trait and social cognitive theorists (Lapsley and Hill, 2009).

Caspi, Roberts, and Shiner (2005) assert, for example, that the antimony between traits and social cognitive theory is exaggerated, and that the two approaches are not only complementary and mutually informative, but also capable of useful integration. Indeed, there is little daylight between the two approaches with respect to the dispositional features of personality structure. There is agreement that traits are tendencies to behave in certain ways given certain activating conditions. Put differently, personality traits are “if-then” conditional propositions, such as “*If Meno Jr.* is put in a situation where demands are placed upon his sense of competency, *then* he is aggressive.” This view is consonant with both social cognitive (Shoda, Mischel, and Wright, 1994) and trait (Caspi and Shiner, 2006) conceptions of dispositions, and it describes not just the way *local* traits work, as the situationists would have it, but rather the person-situation contingency that is implicated in the display of any disposition.

For this reason personologists have insisted on incorporating the psychological meaning of situations into the investigation of behavioral consistency across situations (Funder and Colvin, 1991). It is now a widely shared view that persons and situations interact in complex ways (Kendrick and Funder, 1988; Higgins, 1990); that the person-situation distinction is a false one (Funder, 1996); that situational specificity and behavioral consistency are not antagonistic positions (Ozer, 1986); and that traits are not static, nondevelopmental, and immutable essences but are instead

organizational constructs that operate dynamically in transaction with environments (Caspi and Shiner, 2006).

Indeed, a robust account of agent construal is the leading edge of the counterattack against situationist positions, as Kamtekar (2004) recognized, and it is the social cognitive specification of traits that gets us there. I prefer to understand moral personality in terms of the chronic accessibility of certain social cognitive knowledge structures (Lapsley and Narvaez, 2004). A moral person, on this account, is one for whom moral constructs are chronically accessible and easily activated by contextual primes. Highly accessible moral schemas provide a dispositional readiness to discern the moral dimensions of experience, as well as to underwrite the discriminative facility in selecting situationally appropriate behavior. The key distinction is not whether traits are local or global but whether moral constructs are accessible or inaccessible for appraising the social landscape.

I will say more about this approach below, but suffice to say here that there is an impressive empirical foundation for moral identity as both a moderator and a mediator of moral behavior. Indeed, no other dispositional account of moral personality comes remotely close (Lapsley, in press). It also comes with a plausible developmental story, accounts for individual differences, and is informed by important philosophical accounts on what it means to be a person (Frankfurt, 1988) and a self (Taylor, 1989). This shows how psychology literatures other than the narrow band of social psychology appealed to by situationists can usefully advance mutually informing and mutually corrective dialogue between ethical and psychological theory.

I will conclude with two additional points. First, it is a common analytical device to explicate the work of moral personality by nominating an exemplar trait. Honesty is a popular one. In Sreenivasan's paper the example was kindness. Of course, I understand that simplifying assumptions like this are useful for making a point. However, in this case the simplifying assumption distorts the work of moral personality in a way that makes it harder to turn aside the situationist critique.

The architecture of personality is more holistic than this, as Kamtekar (2004) noted, and any given situation can summon an entire regiment of trait dispositions, some of which can override others or else compete for activation given the exigencies of situations. Individuals carry their entire dispositional repertoire with them, and there is no way to defeat situationism unless this is taken into account. An attempt to vindicate moral character one trait at a time, even for illustrative purposes, will never work. Instead any suitable theory of moral personality must account for the

dynamic interplay of mental construal and situational affordance that underwrites moral choice and behavior.

My second point regards situational affordance. If there is any lesson to learn from the situationism debate, it is that it is naive to believe that situations do not matter at all. The vindication of virtue theory does not depend on demonstrating total trait invariance across situations. This is not the standard. Sreenivasan (2002) has it exactly right when he asserts that cross-situationally consistent character traits might be narrower than imagined (and that no theory of virtue has actually been falsified). Yet the strongest defense of virtue theory is to recognize the complexity of person \times context interactions and to mount a conception of moral personality equal to it. Kamtekar (2004) points the way. She writes that “we should only expect individuals to behave consistently with traits which they deem important to have or in areas in which consistent behavior matters to them” (p. 474).

Indeed, yes, and the self-importance of morality and its centrality to self-identity is a key premise of a social cognitive approach to moral personality mentioned earlier (Aquino and Reed, 2002; Lapsley, in press). On this view a person’s moral identity is a schema consisting of a network of moral trait associations (e.g., being compassionate, fair, kind, honest) that is stored in memory as a complex knowledge structure. Moreover, the self-schema includes multiple other identities as well, not all of which can be actively represented given the limitations of working memory. Whether any of them are influential is partly a function of how trait accessibility interacts with situational cues. On the one hand, highly accessible moral schemas provide a dispositional readiness to discern the moral dimensions of experience, as well as to underwrite the discriminative facility in selecting situationally appropriate behavior. However, situational cues can activate or deactivate the accessibility of moral identity, or else activate some other identity at odds with morality.

Hence situations are crucial to any theory of virtue, on the social cognitive view of things. A situation that primes or activates the accessibility of moral identity strengthens the motivation to act morally. Situational factors that decrease accessibility weaken moral motivation. An adequate defense of virtue theory must start from these empirical realities. This might require giving up some hallowed assumptions of the traditional view, for example, that there is such a thing as a “model of virtue” held out as a standard that few of us can reach. These could well be philosophical fictions that get the defense of virtue theory off on the wrong foot and leave moral character open to rearguard situationist challenges.

Acknowledgments

I profited greatly from Christian Miller's comments on my paper. I also thank Darcia Narvaez and David Watson for discussing several matters with me. Any remaining howlers are my own doing, alas.

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