

Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics

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I. Characterological Psychology, Empirical Inadequacy

Imagine a person making a call in a suburban shopping plaza. As the caller leaves the phone booth, along comes Alice, who drops a folder full of papers that scatter in the caller's path. Will the caller stop and help before the only copy of Alice's magnum opus is trampled by the bargain-hungry throngs? Perhaps it depends on the person: Jeff, an entrepreneur incessantly scheming about fattening his real estate holdings, probably won't, while Nina, a political activist who takes in stray cats, probably will. Nina is the compassionate type; Jeff isn't. In these circumstances we expect their true colors to show. But this may be a mistake, as an experiment conducted by Isen and Levin (1972) shows. There, the paper-dropper was an experimental confederate. For one group of callers, a dime was planted in the phone's coin return slot; for the other, the slot was empty. Here are the results (after Isen and Levin 1972: 387):¹

	Helped	Did not help
Dime	14	2
No dime	1	24

If greedy Jeff finds the dime, he'll likely help; if caring Nina doesn't, she very likely won't. This finding exemplifies a 70-year "situationist" experimental tradition in social and personality psychology, a tradition which has repeatedly demonstrated that the behavioral reliability expected on standard theoretical constructions of personality is not revealed in the systematic observation of behavior.² I will suggest that situationist research has revisionary implications for ethical thought, particularly for the neo-Aristotelian ethical theory prominent in moral philosophy for the past quarter century. For such a claim to be fairly earned, we would have to examine decades of research and debate in social and personality psychology, a project I undertake elsewhere.³ Here, my ambitions are modest: I hope only to produce the

beginnings of a suspicion that Aristotelian moral psychology may be more problematic than philosophers engaged in the ethics and character debate have thought.

In this section, I argue that Aristotelian approaches to ethics, in so far as they presuppose certain distinctive commitments in descriptive psychology, may be subject to damaging empirical criticisms. But I first need to say something about my empirically motivated methodology, because there has been considerable skepticism regarding the relevance of empirical considerations to ethical theorizing. This much skepticism is certainly reasonable: to show that an ethical theory is *descriptively* inadequate is not to show that it is *normatively* inadequate, so even if my empirical critique problematizes Aristotelian descriptive psychology, the prospects for Aristotelian normative theory remain undecided. My reasons for caution here are not claims regarding the “theoretical autonomy” of ethical reflection or putatively clear distinctions between theoretical and practical reason; such claims are the subject of substantial controversy, and justly so.⁴ But I am quite willing to allow that ethical inquiry is methodologically “discontinuous” with descriptive or scientific endeavors (see Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton 1992: 130-31); “ethics,” as Stevenson (1963: 13) said, “must not be psychology.” Results in descriptive psychology, taken by themselves, cannot be decisive factors in evaluating normative claims.⁵ Accordingly, after considering empirical difficulties facing Aristotelian descriptive psychology and sketching what I contend is a more empirically adequate situationist alternative, in sections two and three I consider how the competing moral psychologies fare on normative grounds. If I am right, the approach to moral psychology suggested by situationism enjoys certain advantages over Aristotelianism as a foundation for normative thought. Moreover, while motivating this claim inevitably requires more than empirical assessment of the alternatives, it will emerge that the advantages of situationism as a grounding for normative reflection are, in substantial measure, a result of its more empirically adequate descriptive psychology. Ethics is not simply psychology, but in this instance there are interesting and important connections between the two endeavors.⁶ To begin, then, I must give a sense of the issues on the descriptive side.

We believe the person of good character is not easily swayed by circumstance, and we have a rich normative vocabulary reflecting this ideal: “steady,” “dependable,” “steadfast,” “unwavering,” “unflinching.” Conversely, when a person’s behavior disappoints, we are equipped with terms of abuse to mark what we take to be lack of character: “weak,” “fickle,” “disloyal,” “unfaithful,” “irresolute.” Apparently, character is expected to have regular behavioral manifestations: we believe that the person of good character will behave appropriately, even in situations with substantial pressures to moral failure, and we are similarly confident that we would be foolish to rely on the person of bad character. This interpretative strategy presupposes that the attribution of a character trait allows us to predict an individual’s behavior in novel circumstances; we may not have previously observed Jim’s behavior on a foundering ship, but if we know he is courageous, we know that he will perform his office properly should such a situation arise.⁷ Un-

fortunately, experimental evidence of the sort just mentioned suggests that this approach, however commonplace it may be, is inadequate to the facts of actual behavior: trait attribution is often surprisingly inefficacious in predicting behavior in particular novel situations, because differing behavioral outcomes often seem a function of situational variation more than individual disposition. To put things crudely, people typically lack character. But while characterological moral psychology is problematic from the perspective of empirical psychology, it enjoys an impeccable philosophical provenance—it is a faithful rendering of certain features of Aristotle’s, and neo-Aristotelian, ethical thought.

For Aristotle, good character is “firm and unchangeable” (1984: 1105b1): the virtues are *hexeis* (1984: 1106a10–12), and a *hexis* is a disposition that is “permanent and hard to change” (1984: Categories, 8b25–9a9).⁸ Virtues are supposed to have reliable behavioral manifestations: although good people may suffer misfortunes that impede the activity of virtue, they will never (*oudepote*) behave viciously (1984: 1100b32–4; cf. 1128b29).⁹ In addition, Aristotle thinks that virtue is typified by the performance of right actions in the most difficult and demanding circumstances (1984: 1105a8–10; cf. 1115a25–6); the practically wise *phronimos* will follow the appropriate course of action *whatever* circumstance he is in (1984: 1100b33–1101a7, 1140a25–8; cf. Hardie 1980: 104; Broadie 1991: 58). I don’t claim exegetical authority here, but it is evident that these themes have figured prominently in neo-Aristotelian moral psychology. According to McDowell (1978: 26), properly habituated character “silences” temptations to vice; as Hollis (1995: 172) understands Aristotelianism, character sets “boundary conditions” on the realm of behavioral options.¹⁰ As in Aristotle, contemporary discussions involve assurances not only concerning negative behaviors being precluded by the possession of virtue, but also concerning the positive behaviors virtue will effect: Dent (1975: 328) maintains that the virtuous person will “quite consistently and predictably” conduct herself appropriately in “ever-various and novel situations,” while McDowell (1979: 332; cf. Blum 1994: 178–80) supposes that virtue “issues in nothing but right conduct.” In sum, we can say that Aristotelian virtues are *robust*, or substantially resistant to contrary situational pressures, in their behavioral manifestations.

Aristotelians also tend to maintain some version of an *evaluative consistency* thesis, maintaining that in a given personality the occurrence of a trait with a particular evaluative valence is probabilistically related to the occurrence of other traits with similar evaluative valences.¹¹ For example, the expectation is that a generous person is more likely compassionate than callous; a compassionate and generous person is evaluatively consistent, while a callous and generous person is not. Then for the Aristotelian, good character is supposed to be an integrated association of robust traits.

What would count as evidence supporting the attribution of Aristotelian traits and personality structures? I submit that the evidence we require is observed *behavioral reliability*—behavior consistent with a trait or grouping of related traits across a range of relevant eliciting situations that may vary widely in

their particulars. That is, we are justified in inferring the existence of an Aristotelian personality structure when a person's behavior reliably conforms to the patterns expected on postulation of that structure. In the psychological lexicon, we can say that trait attribution requires substantial *cross-situational consistency* in behavior (e.g., Mischel 1968; Ross and Nisbett 1991). If I am right about the experimental data, systematic observation typically reveals failures of cross-situational consistency; behavior is very often surprisingly unreliable. We have good reason to consider an alternative, more empirically adequate, conception of moral personality.

Situationist social psychology suggests such an alternative. Situationism's three central theses concern behavioral variation, the nature of traits, and trait organization in personality structure:

(i) Behavioral variation across a population owes more to situational differences than dispositional differences among persons. Individual dispositional differences are not as strongly behaviorally individuating as we might have supposed; to a surprising extent we are safest predicting, for a particular situation, that a person will behave pretty much as most others would.¹²

(ii) Empirical evidence problematizes the attribution of robust traits.¹³ Whatever behavioral reliability we do observe may be readily short-circuited by situational variation: in a run of trait-relevant situations with diverse features, an individual to whom we have attributed a given trait will often behave inconsistently with regard to the behavior expected on attribution of that trait.¹⁴ Note that this is not to deny the possibility of temporal stability in behavior; the situationist acknowledges that individuals may exhibit behavioral regularity over time across a run of substantially similar situations (Ross and Nisbett 1991: 101; Wright and Mischel 1987: 1161–2; Shoda, Mischel, and Wright 1994: 681–3).

(iii) Personality structure is not typically evaluatively consistent. For a given person, the dispositions operative in one situation may have a very different evaluative status than those manifested in another situation—evaluatively inconsistent dispositions may “cohabit” in a single personality.¹⁵

This situationist conception of personality is not an unrepentant skepticism about personological determinants of behavior such as that associated with Skinnerian behaviorism;¹⁶ although the situationist rejects the notion of robust traits effecting cross-situationally consistent behavior, she allows the possibility of temporally stable, situation-particular, “local” traits that may reflect dispositional differences among persons. These local traits may be extremely fine-grained: a person might be reliably helpful in iterated trials of the same situation (such as when she finds a dime in a mall phone booth and someone drops a pile of papers in her path), and reliably unhelpful in other, often surprisingly similar, circumstances (say when confronted with the same dropped papers when her search for change is disappointed). The difficulty for the Aristotelian is that local traits are not likely to produce the patterns of behavior expected on broad trait categories like “compassionate” or “courageous:” even seemingly insignificant variations in situation may “tap” different dispositions, effecting inconsistent behavior. We

might say that systematically observed behavior, rather than suggesting evaluatively consistent personality structures, suggests instead *fragmented* personality structures—evaluatively inconsistent associations of large numbers of local traits. Thus, virtue-theoretic conceptions of moral personality, such as Geach's (1977) inventory of seven cardinal virtues, or Aristotle's somewhat less parsimonious inventory of twelve virtues of character and eight intellectual virtues, will seem too roughly hewn in light of the many and various moral dispositions people actually possess.¹⁷

But we are not forced to choose between overly parsimonious characterological accounts and "fragmented" constructions of personality so theoretically unwieldy as to be useless in the explanation and prediction of behavior; situationism allows that a suitably fine-grained inventory of local traits may provide an account of personality that is both empirically adequate and theoretically useful. Were we in possession of a reasonably complete inventory of an individual's local traits, we would know quite a bit about how we could expect that individual to behave, although the expected behavior would not be consistent with regard to broad trait categories.¹⁸ Further, there is no empirical reason to deny that some individuals may possess constellations of local traits that are more or less conducive to success in their particular life circumstances; a person may possess an association of traits, albeit an evaluatively fragmented one, that better serves her in the life she has chosen, or fallen into.

It is important to notice that situationism is not embarrassed by the considerable behavioral regularity we do observe: because the preponderance of our life circumstances may involve a relatively structured range of situations, behavioral patterns are not, for the most part, haphazard (see Mischel 1968: 281). Still, we have reason to doubt that behavioral regularity is as substantial as casual observation—which even when directed at our intimates may occur on occasions limited in both number and diversity—may suggest. Every person, in the course of his or her life, exhibits a multitude of behaviors; since social observation is usually piecemeal and unsystematic, we should be hesitant to take our limited sampling of behaviors as evidence for confident interpretations of personality. At bottom, the question is whether the behavioral regularity we observe is to be primarily explained by reference to robust dispositional structures or situational regularity. The situationist insists that the striking variability of behavior with situational variation favors the latter hypothesis.

To summarize: According to the first situationist thesis, behavioral variation among individuals often owes more to distinct circumstances than distinct personalities; the difference between the person who behaves honestly and the one who fails to do so, for example, may be more a function of situation than character. Moreover, behavior may vary quite radically when compared with that expected on the postulation of a given trait. We have little assurance that a person to whom we attributed a trait will consistently behave in a trait-relevant fashion across a run of trait-relevant situations with variable pressures to such behavior; the putatively "honest" person may very well not consistently display honest

behavior across a diversity of situations where honesty is appropriate.¹⁹ This is just what we would expect on the second situationist thesis, which rejects notions of robust traits. Finally, as the third thesis suggests, expectations of evaluative consistency are likely to be disappointed. Behavioral evidence suggests that personality is comprised of evaluatively fragmented trait-associations rather than evaluatively integrated ones: e. g., for a given person, a local disposition to honesty will often be found together with local dispositions to dishonesty.

Some care is required, because the salience of situationist criticism depends on how characterological psychology is interpreted. Personality and social psychologists (e. g., Brody 1988: 31; Pervin 1994: 108) standardly treat personality traits as dispositions productive of behavior, and philosophers have typically understood virtues along the same lines.²⁰ As Hardie (1980: 107) reads Aristotle, a virtue is a “dispositional property” defined in terms of “hypothetical statements mentioning the conditions of [its] manifestations.” On this *dispositionalist* account, to attribute a virtue is to (implicitly) assert a subjunctive conditional: if a person possesses a virtue, she will exhibit virtue-relevant behavior in a given virtue-relevant eliciting condition with some markedly above chance probability p .²¹ Just as with dispositional interpretations of properties in other areas, we want more of a story than the conditional provides, lest our account seem uninformative or trivial,²² but whatever further story we tell, the conditional does reflect the behavioral reliability that is a central characteristic of virtue. For my purposes the problem is that, even if we add the probabilistic qualification, the conditional is too strong: trait attribution does not ground confident predictions of particular behaviors (with probabilities markedly above chance, or approaching certainty), especially in situations where the behavior is outside the population norm for that situation.²³ If dispositionalism is committed to confident predictions of particular behaviors, it is subject to empirical difficulty.

Here it may be argued that a second approach to Aristotelian moral psychology can escape empirical difficulty, because it does not insist, as dispositionalist interpretations do, on a highly reliable connection between virtue and overt behavior. On an *intellectualist* account, virtue consists in a distinctive “way of seeing”—appropriate habits of moral perception, not reliable dispositions to action, are what distinguish the virtuous person. For example, on McDowell’s interpretation virtue consists in a “perceptual capacity,” or “reliable sensitivity” to morally salient features of one’s environment.²⁴ In calling this approach “intellectualist,” I do not mean to suggest that moral sensitivity excludes less cognitively elaborated psychological mechanisms; of course the Aristotelian may wish to emphasize the importance of emotion or affect in moral understanding.²⁵ The point is simply that while the dispositionalist stresses “overt” behaviors, the intellectualist emphasizes goings-on “within the head.” Then the intellectualist virtue theorist may respond to my empirical challenge as follows: situationist experiments do show that dispositions may be “overridden” by situational factors, even surprisingly “insignificant” ones, but this is only to highlight something we knew all along—the activity of virtue is in many cases going to be very difficult.²⁶ What

typifies the virtuous person is a distinctive outlook, or way of seeing (and feeling about) the world, and nothing the situationist has said shows that this cannot be reliable, even if she has shown that its overt behavioral manifestations may not be. The cognitions and affects appropriate to virtue may be highly reliable despite the fact that dispositions to virtuous actions are not. When the nature of virtue is properly understood, its psychological realizability is not something the situationist experiments should cause us to doubt.

But if intellectualism de-emphasizes the importance of overt behavior too much, it begins to sound a little strange: “his ethical perceptions were unfailingly admirable, although he behaved only averagely” is not the most inspiring epitaph. An attractive account of virtue should be concerned not only with cognitive and affective patterns, but also with patterns of overt behavior; the ethical quality of a life is determined by actions as well as psychological states. If so, intellectualism can at most weaken the dispositionalist behavioral requirement, which would at best partially diffuse the empirical critique. I’m inclined to take intellectualism as a complement, not as an alternative, to dispositionalism, in so far as it may be understood as an explication of the psychological mechanisms which ground behavioral regularity. In any event, we shall see momentarily that even a “pure” intellectualism that entirely eschewed predictions of overt behavior would be subject to empirical difficulty.

The situationist data can itself be read in two ways, corresponding to our two readings of Aristotelianism. In Darley and Batson’s (1973) study demonstrating that increasing subjects’ “degree of hurry” diminished the likelihood of helping behavior, it may appear that time pressures swamped subjects’ dispositions to help someone they perceived to be in need of assistance. This interpretation is also applicable to Milgram’s (1974) infamous obedience experiments. There, subjects who reluctantly consented to torture the recalcitrant “victim” with dangerous-seeming simulated “shocks” appear to have had appropriate attitudes towards compassion, but their dispositions to act on these attitudes were overridden by misguided feelings of obligation, or perhaps intimidation, generated by the experimenter’s insistence on their continued participation in the “learning experiment.” Their moral sensitivities appeared intact, but dispositions to act on them were overwhelmed by the demands of the experimental situation.²⁷ Here, dispositionalist accounts face difficulty: the variability of behavior with situational manipulation suggests that dispositions to moral behavior are not robust in the requisite sense. So far, however, intellectualism remains a viable option; indeed, the empirical difficulties facing dispositionalism may tempt us to think that intellectualism was what the virtue theorist had in mind all along.

But another interpretation of the data problematizes the intellectualist account, by suggesting that the requisite “sensitivity” is itself highly variable with situational variation. This interpretation is recommended by Darley and Batson: apparently, some “hurried” non-helpers failed to help not because haste somehow overwhelmed helping dispositions, but because their haste apparently dampened the awareness required to notice that someone was in need of their assistance.²⁸

Such a reading is also possible for Milgram: perhaps experimental pressures prevented some of his subjects from recognizing their situation as one where moral demands for compassion towards the victim should override their obligation to help the experimenter.²⁹ In these cases, the failure apparently has more to do with a shortcoming of sensitivity than insufficiently robust dispositions to action. More generally, although situationists have typically agreed that cognitive capacities exhibit greater cross-situational consistency than do personality traits (e.g., Mischel 1968: 15), there is some cause to doubt that cognitive ability exhibits a high degree of reliability. Ceci (1993, 1993a) has recently urged a “contextualist” theory of intelligence to account for the often-demonstrated failure of cognitive ability in a particular area “transfer” to closely related areas: mathematical acuity in the classroom, for example, may not strongly correlate with ability to apply similar computations in work-related settings. The cognitive capacities requisite for “moral sensitivity” may exhibit surprising situational variability, just as other capacities and dispositions do.³⁰ Then both the dispositionalist and intellectualist readings of Aristotelianism are subject to charges of empirical inadequacy. Aristotelian moral psychology, if it is construed as a descriptive psychology, emerges as deeply problematic.

At this juncture, the Aristotelian may charge that my arguments have missed the mark: she can allow that situationist research problematizes notions of personality in psychology, together with certain philosophical and lay conceptions of character, and still deny that it makes trouble for her conception of virtue. The psychology literature I rely on concerns personality traits generically construed, with relatively little self-conscious attention to traits we might be tempted to count as virtues, and I have apparently taken the liberty of relating results from that literature to the particular case of the virtues. Like many other writers on ethics, I believe a dispositional analysis applies to virtues as well as other traits.³¹ But I have neglected to discuss one important regard in which virtues are not “generic” traits; it may be argued that the virtues are extremely rare, not widely instantiated, traits.³² If so, the Aristotelian can argue as follows: the situationist research may show that the ordinary person’s character is not as sturdy as we might hope, but it cannot rule out the possibility that there is some small percentage of people who are truly virtuous.³³ The fact that many people failed morally in the observed situations tells us little about the adequacy of Aristotelian descriptive psychology, since such disappointing demographics are exactly what the virtue theorist would expect. Indeed, a virtue-based approach can explain the situationist data: it is precisely because so few people are truly virtuous that we see the results that we do. On this reading, the Aristotelian’s empirical claims are modest enough to be unembarrassed by the data; the account is only committed to the existence of a few exemplary individuals, by reference to which we guide our conduct.³⁴ For example, Blum’s (1994: 94–6) virtue ethic does not require commitments regarding the general realizability of virtue: “it is given to very few to be moral exemplars,” he says, regardless of “how conscientiously one sets oneself to become anything like the moral paragons one admires.” Blum’s (1994:

95–6) claim is not that many of us, or even any of us, can successfully emulate Aristotelian ideals of character, but rather that reflecting on these ideals can help us become people who are, and do, better: through reflection on moral exemplars, we may improve our own character and conduct. If the practical efficacy of emulation is not undercut by the extreme difficulty of the object of emulation being fully realized, emulation is not problematized by situationism.

This argument deserves to be taken seriously, but it is worth noting that such “empirically modest” accounts may deprive Aristotelianism of a substantial measure of its traditional appeal. Aristotelians have typically emphasized moral development and education (Aristotle 1984: e.g., 1099b29–32; 1103b21–31; McDowell: 1979: 333); the ideal of virtue, it is tempting to think, is a sort of model for the condition actual persons (with the right sort of nurturing) might achieve, or at least closely approximate. Recent philosophical writing on moral development and character (e.g., McDowell 1996, Herman 1996) is naturally read as emphasizing the sort of character agents may inculcate, rather than the advantages of reflection on a rarefied ideal. Moreover, it has commonly been held that virtues are to be appealed to in the explanation of behavior (e.g., Brandt 1988: 64); MacIntyre (1984: 199) goes so far as to argue that virtue theory is a necessary element in behavioral science. Perhaps these claims are compatible with an empirically modest moral psychology; perhaps developmental and explanatory appeals to virtue are meant to be of extremely limited empirical applicability. But it seems to me that such assertions are not typically qualified in ways that suggest empirical caution. Indeed, we may wonder if an empirically modest reading of Aristotelianism can account for its recent popularity, a popularity that appears to owe much to the promise of an engaging and lifelike moral psychology. So if we push the “argument from rarity” too far, it becomes uncertain what the distinctive attractions of Aristotelianism are supposed to be. But again, as I said at the outset, an empirically compelling moral psychology is not the only *desideratum* for ethical theory. So I must join the question directly: to what extent does reflection on a few extraordinary individuals facilitate ethically desirable behavior?³⁵ Or more broadly: what exactly are the practical advantages enjoyed by ideals of virtue?

Such questions are asked with a certain prejudice—they assume that ethical reflection is a substantially practical endeavor, aimed at helping to secure ethically desirable behavior. This prejudice may seem quite a reasonable one: isn’t it obvious that ethical reflection has much to do with questions regarding how to live, and so, in many instances, with questions regarding what to do (see Sher 1998: 15–17)? Yet it might be argued that philosophical ethics is properly more theoretical than practical—the aim of ethical theory is a theoretical account of what constitutes right action, perhaps, rather than to provide an approach to reflection that facilitates such action. Questions regarding the proper aims of ethical theory are complex, and I cannot resolve them here. Fortunately, in the context of Aristotelian ethics, it is not obvious that I need to do so, for it seems plain that a practical conception of ethics is Aristotelian in

spirit.³⁶ Aristotle (1984: 1103b28–9) insists that his project in the *Ethics* is not theoretical: “we are inquiring not in order to know what excellence is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use.”³⁷ Virtue ethics in the Aristotelian tradition, I submit, should have something to say about practical questions; while there may be interesting formulations of virtue ethics that reject the practical conception, I address my discussion of the normative issues to those who accept it.³⁸ In what follows, I begin to develop the suggestion that situationist moral psychology may fare better than Aristotelian alternatives with respect to important practical concerns.

II. EMPIRICAL INADEQUACY AND ETHICAL REVISIONISM

In a footnote to his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams (1985: 206) suggests that objections to the notions of character invoked by ideals of virtue are in the end objections to “ethical thought itself rather than one way of conducting it.”³⁹ I’ve just developed an objection to notions of character, at least to Aristotelian notions of character that enjoy wide philosophical currency, so if Williams is right, my charge of empirical inadequacy has radical implications; it undermines the notions of character on which *all* ethical thought depends. There is perhaps good reason for this concern: characterological discourse is not limited to Aristotelianism, but may also be featured in Kantian (Darwall 1986: 310–11; Herman 1993: 111), consequentialist (Railton 1984: 157–8), and contractualist (Rawls 1971: 440–6) approaches, as well as in lay ethical reflection. Of course, if my empirical critique is of philosophical, and not merely psychological, interest, it should have implications for ethical practice. As a moral philosopher, however, I don’t want to show too much; if Williams were right, my approach might be thought to motivate a thoroughgoing amoralism.⁴⁰ Fortunately, my critique needn’t have such unsettling implications: it is not *radically revisionary*, generally problematizing ethical thought, but *conservatively revisionary*, undermining only particular—and dispensable—features of ethical thought associated with Aristotelian characterological psychology.

Without further explication, a claim like Williams’ is difficult to assess, because there are various contexts in which characterological discourse might be alleged indispensable for ethical reflection: moral-psychological assessment and interpretation of self and others, the vocabulary of evaluative discourse, ethical evaluation of action, responsibility assessment, ethical development, and ethical deliberation. In this limited space, although I will first offer some brief remarks regarding some of the more pressing issues, I will consider only one in detail—first-personal ethical deliberation. But this truncated discussion is not without interest: if the verdict here does not unequivocally favor the Aristotelian, perhaps we should begin to suspect that our commitment to certain facets of characterological discourse should be negotiable.

If we took situationism to heart in our ethical practice, we would revise certain habits of moral-psychological assessment—we would hesitate to evaluate per-

sons by reference to robust traits or evaluatively consistent personality structures, on the grounds that these are unreasonable standards to expect actual persons to approximate.⁴¹ That is, we would avoid global personality judgments like “good person” or “bad person,” as well as highly general trait ascriptions like “honest” or “compassionate.” We often think of persons in these ways, so to give up such judgments is to do away with a significant element in ethical thought. But I shall argue that enough material for ethical thought remains when we embrace these revisions.

Notice first that a non-characterological moral psychology does not require that we eschew a normative vocabulary involving hybrid evaluative/descriptive, “thick,” ethical terms such as “courageous” and “brutal” (Williams 1985: 129, 140–1, 148). Williams thinks that the ethical thought of the Greeks, presumably in part because it is equipped with such thick concepts, “may have more to offer” than modern moral philosophy (1985: 198), which attempts to reduce all evaluative discourse to a few highly “general and abstract,” or thin, evaluative terms such as “good,” “right,” and “ought” (1985: 16–17, 128). I won’t try to assess Williams’ characterization of contemporary moral philosophy, or the prospects of “reductive” treatments for ethical concepts,⁴² but I am concerned with the thought that thick evaluative concepts may ground more engaging and productive ethical reflection than reflection couched in thin terms, because my position might be thought to problematize important thick concepts.

Many thick evaluative terms, such as “courageous” and “treacherous,” appear to presuppose a characterological moral psychology, so if we rejected such a psychology for the reasons I have been suggesting, we might be thought to impoverish our evaluative discourse. I do insist that such terms are problematic when they employ certain suppositions in Aristotelian moral psychology, as when used in highly general character assessments. But the present point is that, even supposing there is a clear distinction between the evaluatively thick and the evaluatively thin, there are certainly plausible candidates for thick concepts—e.g., liberty and equality—that do not obviously presuppose problematic characterological notions.⁴³ Moreover, even in cases where such terms are burdened with characterological associations, not all of their uses presuppose the elements of characterological moral psychology I deem problematic. On my view, the employment of such terms in the evaluation of actions, institutions, or states of affairs is not disallowed; for all I’ve said, we may be doing something in calling an action courageous, such as appealing to particular motivations, that we cannot do, or do as well, in thinner terms. Finally, my account has room for characterological discourse of a sort. Evaluative discourse grounded in the attribution of local traits—e.g., “dime-finding, dropped-paper compassionate”—may be plausibly construed as thick; such evaluations are at least not highly general and abstract in the way that “ought” and “good” are.⁴⁴ Then situationism does not suggest reductivism about evaluative discourse, it merely suggests caution in applying thick ethical concepts with certain Aristotelian psychological associations.

Even if I am on track so far, characterological discourse may yet be thought to ground central forms of ethical evaluation. First, characterological psychology may be central to the ethical evaluation of actions: Aristotle (1984: 1105a28–b1) insists that for an action to be considered truly virtuous it must be determined by the appropriately developed character of the agent. Second, in a line derived from Hume, judgments of moral responsibility may be thought to presuppose character assessments, because an agent may be thought fully morally responsible only for those actions which are judged to be legitimate expressions of her character.⁴⁵ If these points go through, skepticism about character may emerge as radically, and not conservatively, revisionary, problematizing not only moral-psychological assessment of the agent, but assessment of the moral quality of actions and the assignment of responsibility quite generally. Adequate discussion of these topics requires more involved treatment than the present space allows; I must here be content with two brief observations.

First, the claim that an Aristotelian characterological approach is uniquely able to provide a rich account of responsibility is contentious; there is a substantial Kantian literature on responsibility, for example, and however attractive we may ultimately find such approaches, it is far from obvious that they must involve Aristotelian characterological discourse, or that they entail impoverished notions of responsibility.⁴⁶ Second, a skepticism about Aristotelian notions of character does not commit one to an implausibly empiricist, non-psychologic account of responsibility and action assessment; my account has room for psychological notions like intention and motivation that may be requisite in such contexts.⁴⁷ Situationism does not suggest a skepticism about the “inner states,” that concern us in moral assessment, but only a skepticism regarding a conception of character as an integrated association of robust traits.

However, there remain a variety of contexts in which the Aristotelian may insist that we cannot get on, or get on as well, without characterological discourse. As I’ve said, I will limit sustained discussion to one area where such claims of practical indispensability might be made, first-personal ethical deliberation. I will say in advance that I have been unable to uncover considerations of this kind that unequivocally favor the Aristotelian approach. Indeed, it appears that situationist moral psychology is practically indispensable in important instances of ethical deliberation.

III. CHARACTER AND DELIBERATION

If I am right, situationism suggests a certain redirection of our ethical attention. Rather than striving to develop characters that will determine our behavior in ways significantly independent of circumstance, we should invest more of our energies in attending to the features of our environment that impact behavioral outcomes. It may seem as though, in accepting this emphasis, we would be abdicating our status as persons — autonomous agents who can, in some deep sense, chart the courses of our own lives. While this way of putting the concern is

overstated, I agree that my approach requires revision of heuristics that may be deeply entrenched in our self-conceptions, in so far as these conceptions have Aristotelian characterological underpinnings. But evaluation of ethical theories, like any problem in theory choice, involves determining the most attractive combination of costs and benefits; no theory, least of all in ethics, comes for free. In concluding, I'll try to show that the discomfort we experience in embracing a situationist moral psychology may be at least partly ameliorated by the promise of substantial advantages in the practice of deliberation.

Reflection on situationism has an obvious benefit in deliberation: it may serve to remind us that, for people like us, the world is a morally dangerous place. In an attitude study related to his obedience experiments, Milgram (1974: 27–31) asked respondents to predict the maximum intensity shock they would deliver were they subjects “required” to punish the confederate “victim” with incrementally increasing shocks: the mean prediction was around 150 volts (level 10), and no subject said they would go beyond 300 volts (level 20). When these subjects were asked to predict the behavior of others, they predicted that at most 1 or 2% of subjects would deliver the maximum shock of 450 volts (level 30). In fact, for a standard permutation of the experiment (version 5; Milgram 1974: 56–61), the mean maximum shock was 360 (level 24), and 65% continued to the highest possible shock of 450 volts (level 30). The usual expectation seems to be that behavior is much more situation-independent than it actually is; apparently, we tend to see character traits as substantially robust, with typical dispositions to moral decency serving as guarantors against destructive behavior even in circumstances like the Milgram experiment where the situational pressures to moral failure are relatively intense. Milgram's study indicates that perception and reality are markedly discrepant in this regard.⁴⁸ The consequence of this discrepancy, I contend, is an increased probability of moral failure; many times our confidence in character is precisely what puts us at risk in morally dangerous situations.⁴⁹ Far from being practically indispensable, characterological discourse is a heuristic we may often have very good reason to dispense with in our deliberations.

Take a prosaic example. Imagine that a colleague with whom you have had a long flirtation invites you for dinner, offering enticement of sumptuous food and fine wine, with the excuse that you are temporarily orphaned while your spouse is out of town. Let's assume the obvious way to read this text is the right one, and assume further that you regard the infidelity that may result as a morally undesirable outcome. If you are like one of Milgram's respondents, you might think that there is little cause for concern; you are, after all, a morally upright person, and a spot of claret never did anyone a bit of harm. On the other hand, if you take the lessons of situationism to heart, you avoid dinner like the plague, because you know that you may not be able to predict your behavior in a problematic situation on the basis of your antecedent values. You do not doubt that you sincerely value fidelity; you simply doubt your ability to act in conformity with this value once

the candles are lit and the wine begins to flow.⁵⁰ Relying on character once in the situation is a mistake, you agree; the way to achieve the ethically desirable result is to recognize that situational pressures may all too easily overwhelm character, and avoid the dangerous situation. I don't think it wild speculation to claim that this is a better strategy than donning your most fetching clothes and dropping by for a "harmless" evening, secure in the knowledge of your righteousness.⁵¹

The way to get things right more often, I suggest, is by attending to the determinative features of situations. We should try, so far as we are able, 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. This means that the determinants of moral success or failure may emerge earlier in an activity than we might think. In our example, the difficulty to be addressed lies less in an exercise of will after dinner than in deciding to engage the situation in the first place, a decision that may occur in a lower pressure, relatively "cool" context where even exquisitely situation-sensitive creatures such as ourselves may be able to act in accordance with their values. For instance, it may be easier to "do the right thing" over the phone than it would be in the moral "hot zone" of an intimate encounter. Then condemnation for ethical failure might very often be directed, not at a particular failure of the will in action, but at a certain culpable naiveté, or insufficiently careful attention to situations. The implication of this is that our duties may be surprisingly complex, involving not simply obligations to particular actions, but a sort of "cognitive responsibility" to attend, in our deliberations, to the determinative features of situations. If it is true that this cognitive responsibility may frequently be exercised in "cooler" decision contexts, this approach might effect a considerable reliability in ethical behavior.

Unfortunately, I doubt our optimism here should be unbounded. Those with knowledge of the Milgram paradigm, for example, are relatively unlikely to be obedient dupes in highly similar situations, but this knowledge may be difficult to apply in different circumstances.⁵² Further, many morally dangerous features of situations will have a degree of subtlety that will make them difficult to unmask, however we try; they may seem as innocuous as not finding change in the coin return, or running a few minutes late for an appointment. In short, we may often be in "Milgram situations" without being so aware—at a seminar, or in a meeting. So my approach cannot offer guarantees. But it can, I submit, focus our ethical attention where it may do the most good: deliberation contexts where reflection on our values may be most likely to make a difference.

The virtue theorist may now object that she and I are simply talking about different things. The examples I have given concern the *description* of herself under which the agent deliberates and acts, while virtue theory concerns the *ideal* the agent deliberates and acts according to. The virtue theorist may grant that a situationist account of personality is often the most effective descriptive psychology for guiding our deliberations, since it will increase our sensitivity to moral risk. But

the question remains as to what regulative ideal should guide our conduct, and the virtue theorist might charge that I have said nothing that should cause us to reject the ideal of virtue in this role. There is the possibility, as we have seen Blum suggest (pp. 511–12 above), that the agent is best served by attempting to emulate an exemplar—perhaps looking to such ideals is the most effective way to facilitate ethically desirable conduct. It is crucial to see that this has the look of an empirical claim concerning the ways in which actual persons interact with ideals; whatever the empirical commitments of the background moral psychology, on this approach our choice of normative theories is impacted by empirical considerations regarding the influence of ideals on conduct. At this point we should require some compelling speculation in order to conclude that these considerations favor virtue-theoretic ideals over other sorts of ethical considerations. In what ways are ideals of virtue better suited to facilitating ethically desirable conduct than other ideals (e. g., Kantian, utilitarian), especially if the virtue theorist should agree that the most helpful descriptive psychology might very well be situationist?

Perhaps this depends on how we construe ideals of virtue.⁵³ The account I have been assuming to date is an *emulation* model, which urges us to approximate the psychology and behavior of the moral exemplar. But there is also the possibility of an *advice* model, where deliberation involves consulting the advice of the ideally virtuous agent. A distinction like this is suggested by Smith (1995: 109–12) as an explication of practical rationality. According to Smith, the desirability of an agent performing an action depends on whether she would perform it were she fully rational. But if the fully rational self is to be emulated by the actual self, there is difficulty.⁵⁴ Suppose that my fully rational self would shake his opponent's hand after losing a hard game of squash. But my actual self, in his actual circumstances, will likely beat his opponent about the head in a fit of unsporting rage if he attempts the polite course. However, if he forces a grin and immediately departs the scene, no such calamity will ensue. It is clear, Smith thinks, that this latter course is what my fully rational self would recommend for my actual self, even though my fully rational self would pursue the more sporting course with no mishap. What my fully rational self would deem rational for my actual self is in part determined by the actual condition of my actual self; what my idealized self advises for my actual self is not necessarily what my idealized self would do in my actual self's circumstances.⁵⁵

This model of practical rationality may be applied to virtue theory. The guidance of the ideally virtuous advisor, like the fully rational self, must take into account the circumstances and capacities of actual, less-than-fully-virtuous agents in determining what they should do. In the case of our dangerous dinner invitation, the ideally virtuous advisor must take into account that actual persons, unlike herself, are susceptible to inappropriate sexual temptation. Although she can attend the dinner without risk, an ordinary person cannot; emulation in this case could have disastrous results. Because actual agents typically cannot attain, or closely approximate, the psychology of an ideally virtuous agent, they cannot, in many instances, safely pursue the course the ideal agent would favor for herself.

With a little imagination we can see that there may be many such cases—morally dangerous circumstances where the virtuous can tread without fear, but the rest of us cannot. If so, emulation may often prove the wrong approach in particular decision contexts. Instead, what effective deliberation requires is advice based on the best understanding of our situational liabilities, and this understanding will be aided by familiarity with the deliverances of situationism. Then if consultation with the ideally virtuous advisor is to help secure desirable conduct, the ideally virtuous advisor must be a situationist psychologist—reference to situationism is here practically indispensable.

We may wonder whether an advice model can be genuinely virtue-theoretic, since the distinctive emphasis of virtue theory is very plausibly thought to involve emulation of the virtuous rather than merely consulting their advice regarding particular behaviors. However, it may be that distinctively virtue-theoretic emulation account can incorporate the insights of the advice model. Ethical emulation is not slavish imitation. We needn't follow the moral exemplar in every respect—one needn't be snub-nosed to emulate Socrates. Nor must we engage in emulation on every occasion; it may be that in some instances securing the ethically desirable result requires another approach, such as that suggested by the advice model. This does not suggest that emulation is never appropriate, but only that on a suitably sophisticated account, emulation is selective. We should emulate the exemplar only in ethically significant respects, and only on those occasions when doing so would be conducive to ethically admirable behavior. Perhaps, then, the virtue theorist should favor some combination of the advice and emulation models. This certainly seems reasonable. But notice what sorts of considerations will help us decide when emulation is appropriate. In many cases, reflection on our situational liabilities is required to determine whether the situation at hand is an appropriate occasion for emulation; we should reflect on our own liability to sexual temptation before following the example of Socrates at a dinner party. And again, as I have been urging, situationist research is an invaluable source of information regarding situational liabilities. So if emulation is to be selective, this selectivity requires reference to situationist moral psychology. Then both the emulation and advice models will profit from situationism.

What I take myself to have shown, so far, is that situationist moral psychology may help ground desirable habits of ethical deliberation. Indeed, we have seen that situationist moral psychology may figure prominently even in virtue-based deliberation. I have also shown, by reflecting on Milgram's experiments and an example of my own, that characterological moral thought may have substantial pitfalls, in so far as it may foster a dangerous neglect of situational influences. Still, there may be situations where characterological reflection, properly understood, is the best approach to ethical deliberation. But this is a claim in need of an argument, especially given the attractions of the situationist approach. I do not pretend to have provided an exhaustive survey of such arguments, but I will conclude by briefly remarking on some difficulties facing one prominent argument for characterological approaches.

If virtues are to be understood as deliberative ideals along the lines we have been considering, the familiar Williams-Stocker speculation concerning alienation does not tell in favor of virtue ethics, because worries about “theoretical mediation”⁵⁶ are re-introduced on the idealized conception. One attraction of character-based approaches is that they appear to escape worries about what we might call the “creepiness” of theory-driven moral reflection; the decreased spontaneity and authenticity, and increased alienation, that are supposed to afflict “theoretical” approaches to morality (Stocker 1976; Williams 1973: 116, 131; 1985: 54–70).⁵⁷ Virtue ethics, if it provides a way of inculcating appropriate dispositions and outlooks, might escape this worry; the properly habituated person behaves as she should, without reference to theory, and so escapes the alienating effects of theoretical mediation.⁵⁸ But suppose, again, that we eschew descriptive-psychological accounts of virtues, and instead construe virtue discourse as pointing to ideals that inform the practice of deliberation. Now worries about theoretical mediation may recur, if ethical practice consists in regulating behavior by reference to an ideal of virtue, instead of simply acting from virtuous dispositions. In this scenario, what room is there for helping someone because one hates to see them suffer, or because one has compassionate dispositions? I do not deny that the virtue theorist can answer this question.⁵⁹ Indeed, I have no interest in denying that competitors like the Kantian and utilitarian may have their own compelling answers to such charges. The point is that on the conception of virtues as regulative ideals the virtue theorist is as much in need of an argument as her opponents. Theoretical mediation through an ideal of virtue is no less obviously problematic than through an ideal of rationality, duty, or maximizing happiness, and alienation, if it is a genuine difficulty, may plague character-based ideals no less than other ideals.

In closing, let me review the dialectic: Aristotelian virtue ethics, when construed as invoking a generally applicable descriptive psychology, may appear more attractive than competitors such as Kantianism and consequentialism, in that characterological moral psychology might allow a more compelling account of moral development and agency. But understood this way, character-based approaches are subject to damaging empirical criticism. If, on the other hand, virtue theory is reformed as a normative theory concerned with regulative ideals more than empirically-constrained psychology, the empirical critique is disarmed, but virtue theory no longer has the selling point of a compelling descriptive psychology. At this juncture the virtue theorist must offer argument to the effect that her favored regulative ideals (however, exactly, they are to be construed), are better suited to effecting morally desirable conduct than alternatives offered by her competitors. I have argued that characterological ideals are not obviously indispensable in some central areas of normative practice, and also noted some attractions of the situationist alternative. This does not suggest that virtue theory is no longer in the running; but it does suggest that it is not, without further argument, out in front of the pack.⁶⁰

Notes

¹Isen and Levin break down the data by sex of subject, but the results do not suggest any strong hypothesis concerning gender and helping behavior.

²Some central studies: Hartshorne and May (1928), Newcomb (1929), Sears (1963), Latané and Darley (1970), Darley and Batson (1973), Zimbardo (1973), and Milgram (1974), Latané and Nida (1981). For reviews in the psychology literature maintaining the sort of skepticism I espouse here, see Vernon (1964), Mischel (1968), Peterson (1968), and Ross and Nisbett (1991).

³In my *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (forthcoming, Cambridge University Press), I offer more detailed discussion of the relevant psychology and a more involved treatment of its normative implications. Flanagan (1991) provided the first sustained account of situationism in philosophy; although our conclusions differ, my discussion is indebted to his.

⁴The standard source of “theoretical autonomy” arguments is Nagel (1980). For “non-autonomist” naturalistic accounts, see Sturgeon (1985), Railton (1986), and Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton (1992: 121–2).

⁵However, it may be that conclusions in descriptive psychology will be one factor we consider when attempting to bring our ethical judgments into Rawlsian reflective equilibrium (see Rawls 1971: 20–1, 432). In recent writings, Rawls (1993: 86–8) may seem to favor a more idealized conception of moral psychology, but I think my approach to moral theory is compatible with his later remarks (1993: 87–8) on the “autonomous” nature of political philosophy.

⁶See Railton (1995: 92–6), who suggests that virtue theory is “empirically vulnerable” to the sort of psychological evidence on which I rely.

⁷There are quantities of empirical work suggesting that this strategy is both widespread and problematic. For a useful review of psychological research demonstrating overconfident behavioral prediction based on trait attribution, see Gilbert and Malone (1995). The example is from Conrad’s (1957/1900) *Lord Jim*; there Conrad is preoccupied with Jim’s unexpected failure to behave courageously when his ship is endangered.

⁸As Audi (1995: 451) has Aristotle, virtuous actions proceed from elements of character with “entrenchment and stability.” According to Brandt (1988: 64), an Aristotelian virtue is “a relatively unchanging disposition.” Translations of Aristotle (1984) used here are from Barnes’ *Oxford Revised Translation*.

⁹The claim is a strong one. In both cited passages, Aristotle uses an emphatic negative, *oudepote*.

¹⁰Compare Williams’ (1973: 92–3) on the morally “unthinkable”—for the right sort of person, certain behavioral options “simply would not come into his head.”

¹¹See Flanagan (1991: 283–90). Aristotle (1984: 1144b30–1145a2) apparently maintains a reciprocity thesis: because of their common origin in practical reason, possession of one particular virtue entails possession of all the virtues (for explication of Aristotle’s argument, see Irwin 1988: 67–71). Some contemporary followers of Aristotle maintain a unity thesis; McDowell claims that the virtues are not independent capacities, but different manifestations of a “single complex sensitivity” (1979: 333; cf. Murdoch 1970: 57–8). A more moderate version of such ideas emerges in discussions of moral “integrity;” while integrity does not require “overall unity,” the enduring projects that manifest integrity cannot be pursued in the presence of mutually undermining evaluative identifications of the sort we would expect from the contraposition of virtue and vice in a single personality (Taylor 1985: 129–30; cf. Williams 116–7; for a related gloss of Aristotle, see Kraut 1988: 83). Once again, these notions are not peculiar to philosophers: a series of studies by Asch (1946) suggests that lay psychology is committed to something like an evaluative consistency thesis.

¹²See Ross and Nisbett (1991: 113). This allows us to see that eschewing characterological psychology does not make behavioral prediction impossible—among other things, behavior will to some extent vary reliably with the situation.

¹³Note that (i) and (ii) are distinct. A disposition, such as a disposition to display aversive behavior when in excruciating pain, may be robust without being strongly individuating. Conversely, a person

may exhibit strongly individuating behavior without possessing robust traits, if his circumstances are sufficiently atypical. Thus, a lack of individuation alone does not imply a lack of robustness, nor does a lack of robustness alone imply a lack of individuation.

¹⁴Personality psychologists such as Epstein (1990; Epstein and O'Brien 1985) point out that large numbers of "aggregated" observations may uncover broad behavioral trends indicative of consistency in behavior. But these trends do not justify much confidence in prediction of particular behaviors. Epstein admits that prediction of particular behaviors in particular situations is "usually hopeless" (1983: 366–7; cf. Epstein and O'Brien 1985: 532), or as Brody (1988: 31) has it, "the relationship between behavior in specific situations and traits is vexed and indeterminant." Note that broad behavioral trends are not all Aristotelianism requires. Moral traits, or at least virtues, are supposed to be robust: we should be able to predict, with a high degree of confidence, how the virtuous person will behave in *any particular situation* we find them in. Moreover, behavioral regularity is not indicative of virtue unless at least some of the observed situations involve substantial pressures to act contrary to virtue; behavioral regularity across a range of undemanding situations is not properly diagnostic of virtue.

¹⁵Many observers of the Holocaust have noted the "paradoxical" levels of inconsistency exhibited by genocidal killers; brutality can coexist all too comfortably, it seems, with compassion (Levi 1989: 56; Lifton 1986, e.g., 337; Todorov 1996: 141). The virtuous no less than the vicious exemplify this paradox; in this age of unstinting biography, we repeatedly find that moral heroes as well as moral monsters exhibit gross inconsistencies in moral personality (Flanagan 1991: 6–12).

¹⁶This is how the personality psychologist Allport (1966: 1) read Skinner (1953: 31). Even the later Skinner (1991) might have been tempted to this implausibly strong view, and some critics have tried to saddle the situationist with such claims (e.g., Funder and Ozer 1983: 111). But situationists acknowledge that individual dispositional differences have a role in differing behavioral outcomes (e.g., Mischel 1968: 8): different individuals will sometimes behave very differently even in highly similar situations.

¹⁷Some psychologists have been even less cautious than philosophers in this regard. Goldberg (1993) argues for a "Five Factor" model of personality, where five primary traits are held to give a relatively complete accounting of behavior, and Eysneck (1991) pares the inventory down to three. Pervin (1994) notes that attempts to adduce overt behavioral implications from the "Big Five" model have been problematic. As Buss (1988: 246) concludes, "[t]he bottom line is that the most widely accepted personality traits may be too inclusive."

¹⁸A moderate personality theorist is Funder (1994), who prefers an inventory of 100 traits. If local trait theory is right, even this taxonomy may be overly parsimonious, given the multitude of dispositions that are likely to emerge in the course of a life.

¹⁹Some of the genocidal Nazi doctors at Auschwitz behaved decently, and even admirably, before the death camp; prior to his appointment at Auschwitz, the war criminal Wirths surreptitiously treated Jews after it had become illegal to do so (Lifton 1986: 386). Note that such "transformation" was not necessarily a function of situational factors that are readily construed as coercive; Lifton (1986: 198) maintains that it was possible for Auschwitz doctors to avoid perpetrating atrocities "without repercussions."

²⁰For this approach in the ethics literature see Alderman (1982: 134), Beauchamp and Childress (1983: 261–5), Blum (1994: 179), Brandt (1970: 27; 1988: 64), Foot (1978: 9–11), Frankena (1973: 65), Jardine (1995: 36), Rawls (1971: 192), Rorty and Wong (1990: 19n1), and Williams (1985: 8–9, 35). Flanagan (1991: 282) takes the view that "virtues are psychological dispositions *productive* of behavior" to be one of "the basic psychological premises of virtue theory."

²¹The dispositionalist, then, is committed to assigning probabilities to "singular events." While the form this commitment takes in trait and virtue theory is empirically problematic, the issue is not that the account is committed to an obviously heterodox account of probability. For example, the dispositionalist can appeal to Popper's "propensity interpretation" of probability for singular events (Popper 1959; for some discussion, see Gillies 1995). Popper (1959: 27) introduced the propensity interpretation in part to address problems in the interpretation of quantum mechanics; difficulty here is not peculiar to interpreting dispositional claims in psychology. There is certainly room for quarrel,

in particular with Popper's notion of "objective" singular probabilities, but those favoring "subjective" interpretations may also appeal to propensities (Skyrms 1984: ch. 3; Lewis 1986: 83–4; Gillies 1995: 108).

²²See Sober (1982) on the old saw about the doctor who explains the soporific quality of opium by reference to a "dormative virtue." We might insist that our conditional not be "barely" true (see Dummett 1976: 89–101), and demand an account of what further psychological properties "ground" (see Peacocke 1992: 49) the relevant virtue property. Notice that this need not be understood as a reductivist demand: it only insists on specification of the psychological contexts of the virtues. Plato's (1963: *Republic* 442–4) tripartite division of the soul is one attempt to do this, but it not obviously a reductive account.

²³Predictions by laypersons appear substantially overconfident in this regard. In one study, Kunda and Nisbett (1986: 210–11) found that subjects' estimated probability that an individual they rated as more honest than another in one situation would retain the same ranking in the next observed situation was typically around .8. This probability reflects an estimated correlation of approximately .81, while the relevant empirical study found the correlation to be .23, which translates into a probability of under .6, not highly above chance. Shweder (1977: 642) found that subjects estimated that a given individual performing "extrovert" behaviors in two different situations would correlate at .92, again far outstripping the correlation of .08 found in empirical work. Of course, our intuitions regarding what counts as "markedly above chance" may be troubled, and variable with context. More might be said here, but it seems that the correlations typically found in empirical work fall rather short of what we think of as "markedly above chance," or "approaching certainty."

²⁴See McDowell (1978: 15, 21, 23, 28–9; 1979: 332–3, 343–6; cf. Murdoch 1970: 64–70). Remember that we have also seen that McDowell expects virtue to eventuate in reliable patterns of conduct; indeed, this is just what one would expect on his internalist understanding of the virtuous person's conception of moral reasons (e.g., 1978: 15–17). Then McDowell's view should probably be read as sharing with the dispositionalist account an emphasis on behavioral regularity.

²⁵Aristotle (1984: 1106b24–5) held that virtue is characterized by the proper habituation of *both* passions and actions. This theme recurs in Aristotle's discussion of the individual virtues: e.g., the courageous person is characterized by appropriate dispositions towards fear (1984: e.g., 1115b11–12). Aristotle (1984: 1111b6–7) also remarks that choice (*prohairesis*) is more useful than action in distinguishing characters. I suspect this point should be taken as reaffirming an earlier point (1984: 1105a29–35) about the limited diagnostic efficacy of external performances rather than as downplaying the role of virtue in determining behavior.

²⁶Aristotle does not think that virtuous activity is unaffected by situational obstacles; as he (1984: 1115b7–8) says in his discussion of courage, some dangers are terrible beyond human strength. But the situationist point is stronger: even situations that are not "terrible" may overwhelm morally appropriate dispositions.

²⁷The best evidence for this is the conflict exhibited by obedient subjects: "[i]n a large number of cases the degree of tension reached extremes that are rarely seen in sociopsychological laboratory studies" (Milgram 1963: 374). According to one observer:

I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching and stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse. He constantly pulled on his earlobe, and twisted his hands. At one point he pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered: "Oh God, let's stop it." And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter, and obeyed to the end (quoted in Milgram 1963: 377).

Here it looks as though the subjects recognized that what they were doing was wrong, but were unable to act on this recognition in the face of the singular situational pressures in the experiment. Bok (1996: 175) offers an intriguing reading of Milgram: it is not that the conflicted obedient decided to obey the experimenter rather than to heed their own moral qualms, but rather that they were paralyzed by their dilemma and failed to make any decision at all, in effect letting the dictates of the situation decide for them. Bok (1996: 190–1) concludes that any acceptable moral theory must require that we develop

whatever virtue (unnamed by her) is required to enable us to resolve “decisional conflicts” like that in Milgram, because this virtue “is a precondition of engaging in deliberation.” Bok’s suggestion that any ethical theory must be an ethic of virtue at least in this respect deserves further discussion; here I can only note that I would expect empirical questions to arise regarding the realizability of this virtue, a point on which Bok may well agree.

²⁸See Darley and Batson (1973: 108): “According to the reflections of some of the subjects, it would be inaccurate to say that they realized the victim’s possible distress, then chose to ignore it; instead, because of the time pressures, they did not perceive the scene...as an occasion for ethical decision.” In interpreting such reflections, we should of course be on the lookout for self-deception and rationalization. But there seems little reason to doubt that Darley and Batson’s explanation in terms of hurry and reduced sensitivity applies to some such cases.

²⁹For example, one of Milgram’s (1974: 45–7) obedient subjects reported that the experiment had (in Milgram’s words) “not bothered him at all.” Another subject reflected on the possibility of injury to the victim as follows (Milgram 1974: 88): “So he’s dead. I did my job!” Perhaps such comments are to be understood as rationalizations made by people who knew that what they were doing was wrong, but I see no reason to deny that they in some instances accurately reflected the subjects’ perception of the situation. Another reading is possible: one might suppose that the obedient tended to be “authoritarian personalities” who did not possess the relevant moral sensitivities in the first place, in which case Milgram’s experiments tell us little about the effect of situational manipulation on such sensitivities. However, attempts to explain the behavior of Milgram’s subjects in terms of personality variables have been unconvincing (Elms 1972: 135–6; Milgram 1974: 205; Miller 1986: 241); the safest assumption seems to be that most subjects possessed the “ordinary” complement of moral sensitivity (see Gibbard 1990: 58–61).

³⁰I am perhaps guilty of oversimplification here: “moral sensitivity” should be understood as requiring both (a) reliable cognitions, and (b) reliable affect (given the requisite cognitions). But this does not alter the substance of the discussion, for three reasons: (i) Moral sensitivity is very plausibly construed as involving a significant cognitive element, if we are to be in position to “see” a situation in an ethical light. (ii) Intellectualist Aristotelians themselves may regard the distinction between cognition and affect as an invidious one: if I understand McDowell (e.g., 1978: 16–19), he denies that cognitive and affective states can be disentangled. (iii) However we understand “moral sensitivity,” the empirical worry stands: the evidence suggests that such sensitivities may be readily situationally “muted.”

³¹See the sources cited in note 20.

³²In some regards, Aristotle may be skeptical about the general realizability of virtue: he claims that the continent person is able to act according to his resolutions more, and the incontinent person less, than most people (1984: 1152a30). Presumably, the genuinely virtuous temperate person would be rarer still. On the other hand, Aristotle expects that virtue is possible for most people, if they are not hopelessly deficient in the capacities required for the appropriate study (1984: 1099b18–19).

³³This is something I can easily grant: it would be a surprising empirical argument indeed that ruled out the bare *possibility* of a particular psychology being realized. Of course, there may be a limited percentage of individuals whose observation would reveal to be relatively “pure types,” but the evidence suggests that this is not the usual case.

³⁴There is a rendering that is still more empirically modest. A “fictionalist” virtue theory does not need to maintain that there are *actual* virtuous people; it is enough, on this view, if we can engage the *ideal* of virtue, whether or not any actual persons approximate that ideal.

³⁵My use of “ethically desirable behavior” is not meant to beg questions in normative ethics; I assume only that there is a substantial range of cases on which a variety of ethical perspectives can agree. For example, the Kantian, consequentialist, and Aristotelian may agree that it would have been ethically desirable for Nazis to disobey genocidal orders, even if their accounts of why this is so differ.

³⁶We might say that Aristotle’s concerns lie closer to “normative ethics” than “metaethics.” I doubt that such a distinction can be neatly drawn (see Kagan 1998: 4–6), and am more doubtful that it is easily applied to Aristotle, but thinking in such terms probably does little harm here.

³⁷Putting things in terms of “becoming good” may suggest that Aristotle’s emphasis is on the “condition of the agent,” rather than her activities. Certainly the former is a distinctive emphasis of virtue theory, but Aristotle is clearly interested in actions as well: he observes that the mere possession of virtue is compatible with a life spent asleep, or in lifelong inactivity, and such lives are not promising candidates for *eudaimonia* (1984: 1095b31–1096a2; cf. 1100b33–5).

³⁸Williams (1985: 1) is one prominent example of a writer with virtue-theoretic sympathies who squarely endorses the practical conception.

³⁹Williams (1985: 201) identifies one source of this objection as a structuralism that construes character as radically socially determined and rejects the notion of psychological dispositions. This position (whether or not actual “structuralists” are committed to it) is much more radical than my own; I allow (as I think anyone must) that persons’ dispositions figure in the explanation of behavior. My quarrel is not with the notion of psychological dispositions, but with particular conceptions of such dispositions.

⁴⁰To some, it will seem glib to dismiss amoralism without argument, but this is not a controversy profitably joined here. My point is that situationism need not have amoralist implications; whether this is boon or bane is a discussion for another time.

⁴¹I do not appeal to the dictum “ought implies can.” More germane is a less demanding formulation: we might complain not that people cannot fully attain robust virtues, but that, for the most part, they cannot come close to doing so. This notion could be rendered as “ought implies can come reasonably close,” which we might think of as a “proximity constraint.” But the issue I pursue here is not quite that virtue theory runs afoul of a proximity constraint. Again, the virtue theorist can grant this much; she needn’t deny that it is difficult to achieve even a distant approximation of virtue. My present disagreement with the virtue theorist concerns how practically efficacious moral psychologies that run afoul of such a constraint are likely to be. I will suggest that my situationist-inspired approach to moral psychology, which I claim fares better than characterological approaches with regard to a proximity constraint, may in virtue of this proximity enjoy certain advantages as a grounding for normative practice.

⁴²Expressivists like Blackburn (1992: 297–9) may be skeptical about the existence of genuinely thick concepts, concepts where the evaluative and descriptive elements are inextricably “fused.” Blackburn appears to think that a “detaching” treatment of the two elements is always possible; his approach is what Williams would call reductivist. My critique should cause concern about certain uses of thick concepts, as we will see presently, but it does not commit us to a view about reductivism.

⁴³The examples are Scheffler’s (1987: 417). Scheffler takes such cases to show that either (i) contemporary moral theories have more room for thick concepts than Williams allows, or (ii) there is not a stable thick/thin demarcation.

⁴⁴There is another way of construing character assessments that does not involve problematic psychological claims, when we take them as a shorthand for claims about the balance of actions performed: e. g., “bad person” for “performs more harmful than beneficial actions.” I have no serious quarrel with such uses, but they are not the most natural understanding of Aristotelianism.

⁴⁵Hume (1978/1740: 411; cf. 575) apparently thinks a person is only to be held responsible for actions proceeding from his “characters and disposition.” Elsewhere, Hume (1978/1740: 349, 477) may have a weaker claim in mind, asserting only that evaluation of motive or intention is requisite for judgments of responsibility.

⁴⁶E. g., Darwall (1986), Herman (1993), and Wallace (1994). The Kantian could go two ways here. She might argue that Kantian conceptions of responsibility can take adequate account of character, as Darwall (1986: 310–11) and Herman (1993: 111) do, in effect attempting to accommodate the Aristotelian’s intuitions. Alternatively, she might reject the Aristotelian’s claims, and argue that judgments of responsibility do not centrally involve character assessment, as Wallace (1994: 122–3) contends. Note that even on the first option, it remains to be seen whether the requisite notions of character are Aristotelian in the sense I have deemed problematic.

⁴⁷For example, I can make use of what Williams (1993: 55) calls the “basic” elements required for an account of responsibility: cause, intention, state, and response. I can certainly talk of causal im-

plication, altered states (such as insanity) which count as exempting conditions, and the requirement of moral response from the accountable wrongdoer. The question of intentions is complicated; I defer proper discussion to my forthcoming *Lack of Character*, and comment only briefly here. It could be argued that intentions must be grounded in persisting dispositions, or we could not make sense of notions like plans and goals that may be requisite for a rich notion of intention. Situationism can accommodate this argument, since it allows for persisting local dispositions and (partly socially structured) plans of life. Situationism is troubled by the claim that intentions must be grounded in robust traits and evaluatively consistent personality structures, but this is a stronger, and more dubious, contention. It is true that situationism highlights the ways in which motivations unknown to the agent may influence behavior, but if this complicates our thinking on intentions, it is a complication familiar from psychological speculation on the unconscious, and not a complication peculiar to situationism.

⁴⁸This is also suggested by Zimbardo's (1973: 53–6) "prison experiment:" some "guards" in his simulated penitentiary rapidly descended into barbaric behavior despite their initial confidence that they were not the sort of person who would do such things.

⁴⁹As Zimbardo (1974: 566) suggested in his comments on Milgram's (1974) book, "the reason we can be so readily manipulated is precisely because we maintain an illusion of personal invulnerability and personal control."

⁵⁰Situationism does not deny that people may consistently avow values; the difficulty is that there is reason to doubt that values, even if consistently embraced, will effect consistent behavioral patterns. Failures of behavior to conform with avowed values and self-conceptions are well-documented in psychology (Mischel 1968: 25; Ross and Nisbett 1991: 98–9); for a compelling demonstration of this sort of phenomenon, see McClelland (1985: 818–20).

⁵¹Other readings of this behavior are possible. One might desire, all things considered, to have an affair; here my "problematic" situation is not viewed as problematic. A desire for this outcome might function at the unconscious level, in which case it is difficult to specify what the agent's view of the situation is. But the case as I've described it seems a fair account of at least some such situations.

⁵²Presumably, the situational variability of cognitive ability that problematizes intellectualist understandings of virtue (see section I) is also relevant at this point.

⁵³I am here indebted to discussion with Stephen Darwall and David Hills.

⁵⁴The following example is Watson's (1982), put to this use by Smith (1995: 111–2).

⁵⁵Compare Rosati (1995: esp. 301–3), who argues that what she terms "Ideal Advisor" accounts of a person's good must hold the personality of the actual person being "advised" relatively "constant." Rosati's point here is different than Smith's; it is not that the advice from the ideal perspective would suggest the wrong course of action if it failed to be informed by the advisee's actual circumstances, but that it would appear alien to the advisee, and so sever the link between consideration of one's good and motivation.

⁵⁶The phrase is Railton's (1984: 137).

⁵⁷See also Blum (1994: 23–61, 173–82), Foot (1978: 165), and MacIntyre (1984). Perhaps the story really begins with Anscombe (1958). As Flanagan (1991: 182) has it, a major attraction of Aristotelianism for Anscombe was the possibility of "a richer and less shadowy conception of moral agency than either utilitarianism or Kantianism had provided."

⁵⁸In McDowell's recent remarks on moral development (1996: 28) he seems to reject the suggestion that there is a "method" for ethical deliberation. Much more needs to be said on these questions, but note that anti-theoretical accounts of moral reflection should not be put too strongly: Surely theoretically informed deliberation is at least sometimes appropriate. For helpful discussion of "Theory Criticism," see Leiter (1997).

⁵⁹Williams (1985: 10) characterizes the virtuous person's deliberation in a way that may provide a solution to this difficulty:

An important point is that the virtue term itself usually does not occur in the content of the deliberation... . [A] courageous person does not typically choose acts as being courageous, and it is a notorious truth that a modest person does not act under the title of modesty. The benevolent or

kindhearted person does benevolent things, but does them under other descriptions, such as “she needs it,” “it will cheer him up,” “it will stop the pain.” The description of the virtue is not itself the description that appears in the consideration.

Considerations of virtue, if this is right, do not generally figure as mediating considerations in a way that threatens alienation. This point deserves discussion, but at present I can only note why I am unmoved. It seems plausible to suppose that appeal to character in deliberation is part of what distinguishes the virtuous person—why wouldn’t she do something explicitly because it was courageous, or because failing to do so would be cowardly? Williams’ speculative ethical phenomenology is at least contentious.

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