Reconciling the Person-Situation-Virtue Ethics Controversy

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Introduction

This paper attempts to reconcile the person-situation-virtue ethics controversy that has spanned the past four decades. The main thesis advanced by situationist social psychologists is that behavior is explained by the various situations or situational factors rather than by character traits, or that character does not matter. In other words, character traits do not determine behavior. A review of the situationist literature, however, shows that it does not undermine a virtue ethics approach, but in fact, both schools of thought add value to our understanding of human behavior. The two main proponents of situationism are Harman (2003, 2002, 1999) and Doris (2002, 1998). The former argues that there is no such thing as character and people are capable of behaving viciously given the right circumstances; the latter does not deny the need to abandon discussion on character, but argues that the situationist research undermines the virtue ethics character-based moral psychology project. Webber (2006) points out that situationists propose a fragmentation theory of character (each character trait is to be specified with reference to a range of features of the situations in which they are manifested with the result that each person has a whole range of traits each with very restricted situational application) and do not subscribe to a regularity theory of character (behavior is regulated by long-term dispositions to have inclinations of certain strengths to behave in certain ways in response to certain kinds of stimuli, and the patterns discerned in the behavior of individuals over time reflect these dispositions). Situationist social psychology in fact provides a perspective that supports a virtue ethics characterological moral psychology. Evidence from the organizational behavior and managerial research literature appears to support this view.

The Situationist Thesis

Experiments in favor of the fragmentation theory, cited by Goldie (2004), Doris (2002), and Merrit (2000), attempt to show the case that it is situational factors that play the major or sole role in determining behavior and not character traits, as argued on the basis of several social psychology experiments. Alzola (2006) and Webber (2006) identify five distinct types of experiments: (1) obedience to authority, (2) mood effects, (3) bystander studies, (4) Good Samaritan or hurry-factor, and (5) honesty and deception in school children. Under the first category of experiments is the Stanley Milgram’s (1960) Yale University Study and the 1971 Philip Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment. In the Milgram experiment, an experimental assistant (an accomplice) asked each subject to administer ‘electric shocks’ to another subject-accomplice (a confederate or experimental assistant) each time the subject-accomplice made a mistake on a word-learning exercise. After each

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1 Harman (2002) states “I believe that ordinary thinking in terms of character traits has had disastrous effects on people’s understanding of each other, or their understanding of what social programs are reasonable to support, and of their understanding of international affairs. I think we need to get people to stop doing this. We need to convince people to look at situational factors and to stop trying to explain things in terms of character traits. We need to abandon all talk of virtue and character, not find a way to save it by reinterpreting it.”
mistake, the subject was asked to administer a shock of higher voltage which resulted in ‘apparent’ audibly increasing distress from the subject-accomplice. Over sixty percent of the subjects shocked their subjects-accomplice through to the highest voltage Milgram (1974). The Milgram experiment is supposed to show that it is not character that causes one to inflict great pain on an innocent person, but rather the situation in which an expert demands one’s obedience. In the Zimbardo experiment, undergraduate volunteers were randomly assigned to be either guards or prisoners in a mock prison setting for a two-week experiment. After less than a week, the experiment was stopped as the subjects were transformed by the situational conditions which resulted in behavior that included sadism, brutality, lying, depression, and extreme stress.

An example of the ‘mood effects’ is Isen and Levin (1972) experiment in which randomly chosen subjects entered a phone booth, and found either a dime secretly left in the change-slot by the experimental assistant (accomplice) or the change-slot was empty. The results showed that whether or not the subject had found a dime made a significant difference as to whether the subject helped to pick up the papers. The conclusion drawn was that the experimental conditions were the major explanatory variables in determining those who helped and those who did not, rather than any character traits or other personality variables. In the case of bystander studies, Latane and Rodin (1969) and Latane and Darley (1970, 1968) concluded that the presence or absence of others seems to have made an important contribution to the subjects’ willingness to help the subjects-accomplice. In particular, Latane and Rodin (1969) study found that when a subject was alone in a waiting room, seventy percent offered to help the moaning and screaming subject-accomplice victim who was in an adjoining room. When the subject was with another subject-accomplice who shrugged off the victim’s cries and did not offer to help, only seven percent of the subject intervened. Asch (1951) provides another set of experiments that demonstrate the group effect on behavior and found that subjects were willing to make statements that appeared to be contradicted by the best evidence of their senses.

Darley and Baston (1973) describe an experiment in which seminary students were asked to prepare a short talk on either the Good Samaritan parable or possible occupations for seminary students, and to walk to another building to give a talk. On the way, the seminarians encountered a subject-accomplice apparently in need of medical attention. It turned out that the ‘degree of hurry’ was apparently the single most important factor in helping or not helping. Specifically, the number of seminary students who stopped to help appeared to have depended greatly on whether they had been told that they needed to hurry in order to deliver their talk on time; the ratio to those who were not in a hurry (and helped) than to those who were in a hurry (and did not help) was over sixty percent. Finally, Hawthshorne and May (1928) studied eight thousand school children that tested for honesty across a wide range of situations (willingness to lie to avoid getting another student in trouble, cheating on a test or stealing change on a table) and found that almost none of the subjects behaved consistently across situations. The conclusion was that honesty was not an internal trait.

According to situationism, therefore, traditional personality or character traits (for example, virtues such as honesty, kindness, cowardice) play less of a role in predicting and explaining behavior than do particular situational factors. In other words, the views or strong intuitions about the status of character traits and character development are either mistaken or does not exist. The situationist
experiments in social psychology seem to demonstrate that a wide selection of people, who presumably have different character traits, react in more or less the same way in situations in which we would expect vices and virtues to become apparent (Berges, 2002). Even minor and seemingly irrelevant differences in the experimental or perceived conditions seem to make significant differences in how people behave. Situationists refer to this as the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE) or correspondence bias. It is a bias toward explanations in terms of corresponding personality traits (ignoring situational factors) and is associated with a perceptual tendency to pay more attention to a figure than to its grounds (Nisbett, 1998). In other word, the experimental research shows that much of our ordinary moral thinking commits the FAE when someone assumes that behavior patterns are due to the character traits of an agent, rather than to situational factors. It results from an apparent inflated belief in the importance of personality traits and dispositions, together with their failure to recognize the importance of situational factors in affecting behavior (Ross and Nisbett, 1991). Harman (2002) notes that this correspondence bias results in a confirmation bias, that is, having attributed a trait to a given person, an observer has a strong tendency to continue to attribute that trait to the person even in the face of considerable disconfirming evidence, in other words, it is a bias toward noting evidence that is in accord with the person's hypothesis and toward disregarding evidence against it. In summary, Harman (2002) concludes that “what the experiments do show is that aspects of a particular situation is important to how a person acts in ways that ordinary people do not normally appreciate, leading them to attribute certain distinctive actions to an agent's distinctive character rather than to subtle aspects of the situation. In particular, observers of some of the events that occur in these experiments are strongly inclined to blame those participants who did not stop to help or who provided intense shocks, thinking that the explanation of the agent’s immoral actions lays in their terrible character.”

Situationist social psychologists are of the view that virtue-based characterological moral psychology as well as personality psychology, subscribe to a globalist view of character, that is, character traits are robust and exhibit a high degree of cross-situational consistency. Globalism refers to theories that hold the following three characteristics (Alzola, 2006; Stichter, 2005): (1) cross-situational consistency (character and personality traits are reliably manifested in trait-relevant behavior across a diversity of trait-relevant eliciting conditions, that is, robustness of character traits). (2) stability (character and personality traits are reliably manifested in trait-relevant eliciting conditions and traits that remain over time), and (3) evaluate integration \(^2\) (in a given character or personality evaluative valence is probabilistically related to the occurrence of other traits with similar evaluative valences, that is, the idea that virtues form a unity). Situationist social psychologists claim that both characterological moral psychology and personality psychology \(^3\) are

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\(^2\) Doris (1998) refers to this as the evaluate consistency thesis and gives the example that 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. Good character is supposed to be an integrated association of robust traits and the virtuous person will quite consistently and predictably conduct himself or herself appropriately in various and novel situations.

\(^3\) Harman (2002) is of the view that personality theory or personality psychology is in very bad institutional shape and has collapsed as an academic subject.
empirically inadequate since the experiments fails to reveal the behavioral patterns expected by globalism. The claim supposes that (Aristotelian) virtues are robust or substantially resistant to contrary situational pressures in behavioral manifestations so that a virtuous agent will act virtuously in a consistent manner, across a wide range of situations in which character is being tested.

Harman (2002) concludes that the evidence indicates that people may differ in certain relatively narrow traits but do not have broad and stable dispositions corresponding to the sorts of character and personality traits that people normally suppose to have. Doris (1998) also states that trait attribution is often surprisingly inefficacious in predicting behavior in particular novel situations because differing behavioral outcomes seem to be a function of situational variation more than individual disposition. In other words behavioral reliability or cross-situational consistencies vary widely. The results of the experiments challenge the assumption that the subjects have robust character traits; it appears that their behavior is consistent within each situation, but this consistency does not extend to other situations, and even slight variations in the features of a situation can lead to dramatic shifts in behavior (Kunda, 1999, pp. 499).

In summary, situationist social psychologists reject a globalist view of human nature (the idea that people possess robust character traits which enable the subjects to withstand situational pressures and behave consistently across situations). They propose a situationist view as an alternate, more empirically adequate conception of personality structure (the idea that people lack robust character traits and therefore behave inconsistently across situations). Doris (1998) outlines three characteristics of such a view: (1) behavioral variation across a population owes more to situational differences than dispositional differences, (2) an individual to whom we have attributed a given trait will often behave inconsistently with regard to the behavior expected in attribution of that trait, and (3) personality structure is not typically evaluatively consistent in that the dispositions operative in one situation may have a very different evaluative status than those manifested in another situation. Behavioral evidence suggests that a personality structure is evaluatively fragmented (seemingly insignificant variations in situations may affect inconsistent behavior) rather than an evaluative integration of robust character traits. Doris (2002, 1998) suggests that situationism allows the useful possibility of temporally stable, situation-particular local traits that may reflect dispositional differences among persons. As such, two normative theses are proposed: (1) people should be evaluated not in terms of robust character traits but rather in terms of local situation-specific traits and (2) moral education should aim not at inculcating robust virtues, but rather at helping bring about situations propitious to virtuous behavior.

Response and Reconciliation: A Virtue Ethics Perspective.

The substantive claims made by situationist social psychologists in fact do not, for the most part, undermine or disagree with a proper understanding of virtue ethics, but rather stems from a misunderstanding of concepts of moral character, faulty conclusions and generalizations of experimental results. In fact, not only is the situationist thesis not in opposition to virtue ethics, but the former empirically reinforces and enriches the understanding of the latter. Situationists set up a dichotomy in that one either views character traits as relevant to the explanations of behavior or view features of the situation as relevant to the explanation. However, virtue ethics subscribes to the view that both features of the agent (including
inclinations, intentions, desires, beliefs, etc.) and of the situation are relevant in explaining how a person would respond under different situational factors.

Of the five kinds of experiments cited in favor of the fragmentation theory, Webber (2006) argues that two should be discounted. The first are the mood experiments since it has been pointed out that repetitions of these experiments have yielded wildly differing results and nobody has shown that such minor situational variations affect the likelihood of responding to someone seemingly to be in serious distress. The other experiment to be discounted is the Stanford Prison Experiment since with no repetition and no control groups, as well as the extreme conditions (the disorienting nature of the opening stages of the experiment for the prisoners, the sheer strangeness, and threatening instability of the situation faced by the guards) make it difficult to be confident of any extrapolation to less extreme situations. With respect to the interpretation of the experimental empirical data, Alzola (2006) summarizes several methodological objections and limitations: (1) ecological validity (a given experimental finding does not accurately reflect phenomena found in natural contexts), (2) less conclusive experimental results (subsequent variants of the same experiments show less conclusive results), (3) extreme and novel experimental situations (the experimenters observed behavior in extreme situations, far removed from everyday life), (4) limitations of cross-sectional studies (the experiments did not track the behavior of individuals across situations; they observed any given individual only on one occasion in a particular situation), (5) inferences of individual behavior from group behavior (it is misleading to infer individual behavior from group outcomes, see also, Kamtekar (2004), pp. 466), and (6) inferences of adult behavior from children (it is inappropriate to infer adult behavior from children). For example Stichter (2005) also notes that in none of the experiments are the subjects tested in a variety of situations or over an extended period of time to determine whether they exhibit any stable dispositions. The experiments were not designed to test for the presence or absence of dispositions and so it is unclear how conclusions about character trait could be established in such experiments in which character traits were neither being tested nor controlled.

Stichter (2005), however, notes that in the Milgram experiment, there is some reason to suspect that character traits could be relevant in explaining results. For example, what explains that after 300 volts, more than one-third of the subjects stopped administering shocks at various times before reaching the maximum 450 volts? With respect to the Good Samaritan experiment, which shows the ‘degree of hurry’ was a major factor, but it does not follow that the seminarians’ religion and moral views had no effect. Webber (2006) also observes that in the Milgram experiment, the subjects often displayed striking reactions of emotional strain and afterwards often reported significant levels of stress and nervous tension. The subjects apparently acted against their compassionate inclinations and not out of obedience to the experimenter. Webber (2006, pp. 199) suggests that the experiment might be better described as deference, rather than obedience to authority, since in another version of the experiment in which there were two experimenters who disagreed at 150 volts over whether to continue, all the subjects stopped at that point. The experimenters were perceived to have moral authority which does not mitigate against the idea that the subjects were willing to obey authority. Virtue ethicists do not deny that ordinary moral thinking commits the FAE, but the FAE is an informal fallacy since the fact that people are prone to make this generalization shows that it is a common fallacious type of reasoning, but it does not
follow that there are no character traits (Stichter, 2005). There is no reason to believe that ordinary moral thinking might lead people to view the experimental results as due only to character defects.

The second misunderstanding is that an Aristotelian virtue ethics perspective, unlike personality psychology, does not subscribe to a globalist view of character as being true of anyone who is not virtuous. The lack of behavioral cross-situational consistency as demonstrated by the experimental research findings shows that most people, although equipped with some character traits, cannot be described as virtuous agents as understood by virtue ethicists. Virtuous agents possess a full set of firm character traits and such a person may reliably exhibit cross-situational consistency. Under a virtue ethics moral psychology, character does not reliably determine most people’s behavior, a result that is consistent with the situationist social psychology experimental findings.

The experiments therefore reveal that most people have weak characters especially when confronted with intense situations that challenge morally upright behavior and that the idea of a virtuous agent is not as common as many people might believe. Virtues (vices) are good (bad) habits or character traits that are made firm by habituation and practice. Virtues do not determine a person’s behavior, but it determines the way that person is and his or her disposition, which is expressed in one’s decision, determined through rational deliberation (Alzola, 2006). We would certainly expect a non-virtuous agent not to possess firm character traits. Berges (2002) identifies three considerations that explain why situationist social psychology diagnosis relies on a misreading of the virtue ethicists’ descriptive commitments in moral psychology. First is the Aristotelian description and distinction between the enkratic (continent, self-controlled) versus the virtuous, and the akratic (incontinent, weak-willed) versus the vicious. The enkratic agent may act in a virtuous manner by resisting contrary impulses from disordered desires and emotions, while the akratic agent may act in a non-virtuous manner despite the intention to act virtuously. Berges (2002) points out that both the enkratic and akratic agents fall short of virtue (possession of stable character traits), although both to some extent know what the right thing to do is, but are plagued by strong emotions and appetites. In the case of the akratic, although the rational appetite is able to order the non-rational appetites, the agent does so at the cost of renewed assaults from the rational.

In observing behavior, there is also confusion between drawing the distinction between the akratic agent and the vicious agent, and between the enkratic agent and the virtuous agent. It appears that the akratic and vicious persons are identical with respect to external behavior, but the difference lies in that the latter knows

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4 In a critique of John Doris’ (2002) book on Lack of Character, Peter Vranus shows (1) that the argument about compassion-relevant behavior needs to show not only that people possess no robust character trait of compassion, but also that people possess no other robust character traits and (2) low consistency falls short of inconsistency. Also, in distinguishing between intersitacional and intrapersonal (behavioral) consistencies, Doris’ premise that “if intrapersonal consistency is typically high, then intersituational consistency should be high,” is false and that an understanding why it is false suggests an explanation of the low intersituational consistency (http://www.public.lastate.edu/vranas/Homesite/research.htm).
what the right course of action is but fails to do so because of a weak will. Similarly, the enkritic agent shows signs of firm character traits since he or she may act reliably in doing the right thing and is able to resist desires that are contrary to what is believed to be right, in spite of assaults from the non-rational appetites. However, a truly virtuous agent would not only not be tempted by situational factors and so not suffer from violent assaults of the appetites and emotions, but in fact would find pleasure in refraining from unethical acts and enjoy performing ethical acts (Alzola, 2006). The difference between a virtuous (vicious) act and an enkritic (akritic) act is that the latter involves a struggle to overcome contrary inclinations; the difference between the enkritic agent and the akritic agent is that the former wins the struggle the agent believes how he or she ought to act. Webber (2006, p. 207) observes that it seems that weakness of will results from the inclination acted upon being stronger than the combination of the inclination one believes one should act on and the inclination to do whatever one believes one should do; self-control results from this combination being stronger than the inclination to behave otherwise. Virtue and vice involves a greater difference between the strengths of competing inclinations than do strength and weakness of will. Berges (2002) also notes that, as moral education is supposed to teach us, a sign of good character is not just when we do the right thing in the right circumstances, but the agent ought to find pleasure in doing the right thing and in feeling appropriate emotions and desires at appropriate times; this is not possible if one is struggling against emotional assaults to do otherwise. Most ordinary people waver between enkritic and akratic characters, between performing good and bad actions; it is a matter of degree along a continuum. This explains the concept of the ‘slippery slope’ or back-sliding since both types of agents have not yet achieved full control over their desires, appetites, and emotions. As such, pressures from the non-rational will ‘pull’ the agents down the slope to perform actions which are contrary to what they believe are right. In terms of the distribution of ethicality in behavior, evidence from both a virtue ethics moral characterological psychology and situationist social psychology perspectives shows that ordinary people are governed by the law of normality (see Figure 1): the predictive pattern of the degree of stability of character traits. The characteristics of the distribution is consistent with Doris’ (2002) reference to probability which should not be taken as a constitutive claim, but as an evidential one: an abnormally high probability that a given person will seek to alleviate the apparent distress of another person indicates the presence of the corresponding character trait, but the trait could be possessed without that high probability being abnormal (Webber, 2006, p. 203). Most people in the akratic-enkritic range can be described as ‘Ordinary Unethical Behavior’, a phrase coined by Gino and Bazerman (2005) who demonstrated that the majority of unethical behaviors are unintentional and ordinary, affecting most people. Situations will have an impact on behavior as demonstrated by the result of the situationist

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Kupperman (1991, p. 17) defines the broader notion of character as one’s standard pattern of thought and action with respect to one’s own and others’ well-being and other major concerns and commitments. It includes virtues and vices, values and emotions, natural dispositions as well as acts. Hartman (2006) notes one’s character ought to be consistent and coherent over time and is essential to personal identity. For example, to be a person of truly generous character is to have and to want to have settled dispositions and values that consistently guide one’s actions. Good character is therefore, not only a matter a doing the consistently right things, but also of having the right desires and emotions, and involves having good reasons for acting.
experiments, but only a fully virtuous agent would behave predictably, independent of circumstances, as he or she would pursue the right course of action without consciously considering any other.

The second consideration is the failure of situationists to distinguish between virtues and natural dispositions. Although the latter may be termed character traits, Berges (2002) points out that they fall short of virtues in that they are not the product of systematic conscious habituation and therefore are not reliable. Having an undesirable natural disposition, for example, lacking honesty does not imply that a person never behaves honestly, but that the person does not act honestly across a variety of situations (Stichter, 2005). Human personalities are not typically structured as an evaluatively integrated association of robust traits, so that one would expect to find much variability across situations and not observe substantial consistencies. Berges (2002) identifies several distinctions between natural dispositions and virtues. Natural dispositions or traits are not the product of habituation and are simply the raw material on which habituation must be set to work. Unless it is made firm through habituation (habitually doing the right thing through practice), a natural disposition can be improved or worsened, so there is no reason to believe that this concept of character trait would be reliable and so display cross-situational consistency (someone who is naturally kind may behave unkindly in some situations; someone who is naturally mean may behave generously in some situations). Virtues on the other hand, are the result of a process of conscious and systematic habituation, which are anchored in firm beliefs or principles. No agent therefore, is naturally virtuous since he or she is not naturally in possession of firm character traits; such agents are neither virtuous nor vicious, but merely incapable of acting according to firm motives and lacking stable character traits.

The third consideration is related to the second. Robust character traits require systematic conscious habituation over a long period of time across a variety of
situations, so that people can have personalities without having acquired robust traits of virtues and vices. Virtues and vices therefore, are more than dispositions; they lead one to act in a certain way for characteristic reasons, in a characteristic manner, and to have characteristic attitudes and emotions (Alzola, 2006). It is important to note that situationists (e.g., Doris, 2002) do not claim that people do not have virtues, but that they do not have character traits as traditionally conceived. In the Aristotelian view, Webber (2006, p. 205) defines a character trait as a relatively stable disposition to be inclined with a certain strength towards a certain kind of behavior in response to a certain kind of situational feature. Virtuous traits are therefore not simply dispositions to behave in a certain kind of way whenever a certain kind of situational feature is present. Virtuous and vicious behaviors therefore, do not just consist in behaving in a certain way too often, but in that way on appropriate as well as inappropriate occasions.

In addition, traits are virtues only if the inclinations are tempered by other inclinations so that full possession of any one virtue means habitually being inclined to behave in a certain way with the right degree of strength (relative to the strength of other habitual inclinations) in the presence of a certain situational feature (Webber, 2006, p. 206). This reflects the idea of a single web of interdependent virtues or what is referred as the evaluative consistency thesis. Alzola (2006) also remarks that situationists attribute behavior to a wrong disposition. For example, Solomon (2003, p. 53) points out that obedience to authority is more robust (since virtually everyone has been brought up with this virtue) than compassion (a virtue more often praised than practiced). Hartman (2006) also points out that the Asch experiment failed to distinguish between the character traits of intellectual courage and the vice of stubbornness. Others (De Paul, 2000; Miller, 2003) have claimed that the experimental data are irrelevant to characterological ethical discourse since they do not view virtues such as compassion to be widespread, but to be ideals for which we should aim. Character traits attributions are justified only after observing how a person reacts to a variety of situations overtime and not just in one or even a few situations.

Webber (2006) argues that the regularity theory understands character as behavior to be regulated by long-term dispositions to have inclinations of certain strengths to behave in certain ways in response to certain kinds of stimuli, and the patterns discerned in the behavior of individuals over time reflects these dispositions. In other words, in order to count as a character trait, such a disposition ought to yield an inclination of about the same strength whenever the subject is confronted with situational features. To be virtuous, therefore, is not the same as dispositions to behave in a certain kind of way with the right degree of strength (relative to the strength of other habitual inclinations) in the presence of a certain situational feature. One final consideration with respect to virtuous acts is the distinction between acting from virtue (virtuous acts in themselves) and acting merely in accordance with virtue (virtuous acts in general). Audi (1995) advises that virtue ethics should tell us not only what is, but also what constitutes acting from what is. Merely to do the right thing, say, from self-interest, is not to live up to a standard of virtue.

Webber (2006) also remarks that the situationist literature gives ambiguous definitions of the position they are opposed to. For example, what is meant by a situation being ‘conducive’ to a certain kind of behavior, or that kind of behavior being ‘appropriate’ in that situation? Webber (2006) infers that these terms should be considered as non-moral descriptive terms: the proponents of the fragmentation theory take the data to indicate that whether or not one will respond to the apparent distress of another person by trying to alleviate it depends not on whether one is
disposed to do so, but on situational features such as instructions from an authority figure, one's degree of hurry, and the passivity of bystanders. Specifically, situationists would interpret and conclude that experimental data do not provide evidence for the regularity theory since there was not a significant diversity of behavior among subjects of these experiments, and so, we do not possess character traits as traditionally construed. Webber (2006) further argues that the experimental data employed provides evidence for the situationist view only if we understand it in the light of a behaviorist understanding of traits in terms of stimulus and response, rather than in the light of more traditional understanding in terms of inner events such as inclination. On the other hand, if an understanding of a character trait under the regularity theory is construed as a disposition towards certain behavioral inclinations in response to a particular kind of stimulus (behavior is the result of the relative strengths of one’s competing inclination), then the differences between the levels at which different subjects ended the experiment reflect differences in the relative strengths of their competing inclinations. If the regularity theory of character is employed when interpreting the data, then there is positive evidence in favor of differing character traits. Webber (2006) provides evidence that more recent experiments have shown the regularity theory or traditional conception of character traits have greater explanatory and predictive power than its situationist rival. While situationist moral psychology may give us some critical insights into human behavior, it does not necessarily make better predictions of human behavior than the traditionally conceived regularity theory of character.

**Evidence from Organizational Research**

Research in organizational behavior clearly supports the view that organizational cultures provide situational settings that can have powerful influence on behavior. Trevino (1986) remarks that organizational culture (defined as the common set of assumptions, values and beliefs shared by organizational members) influences thoughts and feelings, and guides behavior. It contributes to an individual’s moral development by allowing organizational members decision-making responsibility and by encouraging role-taking opportunities; it manifests itself in norms, rituals, ceremonies, legends and the organization’s choice of heroes and heroines. Management and organizational research have also shown (1) that ethical behavior depends on the employee’s ability to recognize ethical issues and that this ability appears to be a function of corporate culture more than of individual employee’s attributes, (2) that people can be inoculated against crowd-induced culpable indifference by being taught to recognize organizational influence and to act appropriately despite it, and (3) that individuals with weak dispositions are more likely to be shaped by the situational features of a organization (Alzola, 2006; Hartman, 2006; Beaman et al, 1978; Slater, 2004; Chen et al., 1997; Davis-Blake and Pfeffer, 1986; Snyder and Ickes, 1995). On the other hand, Alzola (2006) cites a number of studies in organizational behavior (career mobility and promotions, negotiation, attitudes, job performance and training proficiency, job satisfaction, and cooperative behavior) that have found some effects of dispositions on individual behavior in the corporate setting. As well, virtue ethics in business have advanced the case for the role of virtues, especially Aristotelian characterological moral psychology in business (Solomon, 2004, 2003; Weaver, 2006; Beadle and Moore, 2006; Moore, 2005 and 2002; Hartman, 2006, 2001, 1998; Koehn, 1998).

Overall, there is strong justification in the organizational behavior and management research literature to support, not only that the situational or organizational features are powerful influences on behavior, but also internal characteristics, (strength of
disposition, desires and intention) support the role of virtues in business. For example, Jones and Ryan (1995) bridge the organizational theory/climate with individual ethical behavior using a moral approbation model (moral approval from oneself or others) and considers four factors when determining the level of moral responsibility in a given situation: (1) the severity of the act’s consequences, (2) the certainty that the act is moral or immoral, (3) the act’s degree of complicity, and (4) the extent of pressure the actor feels to behave unethically. Trevino (1986) uses an interactionist model of ethical decision making in organizations that combines individual variables (moral development, ego strength, field dependence, and locus of control) with situational variables (the organization’s normative structure, referent others, obedience to authority, responsibility for consequences, reinforcement contingencies, and other pressures) to explain and predict ethical decision-making behavior of individuals in organizations. The American Behavioral Scientist has devoted an entire issue to demonstrate that there could be a fruitful and mutually enriching relationship between the behavioral sciences and virtue ethics that provide stimulating perspectives about human limitations (Richardson, 2003). In particular, Fowers and Tjeltveit (2003) set the context for a discussion of the place of virtue ethics in the behavioral sciences, and present virtue ethics as a framework that makes it possible to break down the standard dichotomies between facts and values, individuals and society, and behavioral tendencies and a complete life.

Conclusion

The recommendations suggested by situationists are relevant and helpful in explaining behavior. For example, Harman (2002) advises that if you are trying not to give into temptation to drink alcohol, to smoke, or to eat caloric food, the best advice is the situationist slogan, “People! Places! Things! Don’t go to places where people drink! Do not carry cigarettes or a lighter and avoid people who smoke! Stay out of the kitchen!” But to avoid all such situations would make life practically impossible. Doris (1998) suggests we should try insofar as we are able, to avoid ‘near occasions for sins’ (morally dangerous situations) and, at the same time, we should seek ‘near occasions for happier behaviors’ (situations conducive to ethically desirable outcomes). For example, we should try to work with firms that have an ethically-charged environment since such organizations can provide those situational features that may promote ethically upright behavior. Another suggestion is that a decision taken in a ‘lower pressure’ context might considerably affect reliability in ethical behavior (Doris, 1998, p. 517). The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics (1999) notes that it is important to identify situational factors that keep people from doing the wrong things. One of those situational features is known as scripts, which are short cuts that take place of careful thinking in familiar situations. To address this potential for deviant conduct, it is suggested that companies keep employees out of highly repetitive situations or use technology to eliminate repetitive situations.

Situationist social psychologists have cited a number of experiments to support the view that it is situational features that are the major or sole factors in determining or explaining behavior. However, the design of the experiments fails to take into account some significant consequences and understanding of an Aristotelian conception of character traits and developments and as such, the experiments do not show anything which necessitates a revision of the role of a virtue ethics perspective (Berges, 2002). Doris (1998, p. 508) poses the question whether the behavioral regularity we observe is to be primarily explained by reference to robust dispositional structures or situational regularity. While the determinative features of situations have shown to have considerable and powerful effects on our behavior, virtue-ethics
characterological moral psychology do explain the observation of behavior regularity. Virtues do not develop in a vacuum, but in concrete situations and circumstances. Situational regularity reinforces the development of the virtues so that they become a second nature. Character dispositions that are not robust cannot reliably determine behavior, but that does not rule out that robust traits, however rare, cannot determine behavior. In promoting ethically-upright behavior, one needs to address the situational features through codes, rules, regulation and enforcement, but also internal characteristics through education and training, especially through the development of virtues.

Two related avenues for future research can be explored. The first, as suggested by Doris (1998), is that virtue theory as understood to be a normative theory, needs provide regulative ideals that are better suited to effecting morally desirable conduct than alternatives offered by her competitors. Secondly, the role of practical wisdom or judgment needs to be developed to better understand and give further insights into the person-situation-virtue ethics project.

References


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