**The Milgram Experiment No One (in philosophy) is Talking About**

ABSTRACT: Philosophers such as Harman and Dorris use the Milgram experiment to show how tiny, seemingly inconsequential, situational variables have a surprising, but dramatic effect on behaviour. In this paper, I discuss variation 24 of the Milgram experiment, the Relationship Condition. This variation, which involved family members or friends taking on both the roles of Teacher and Learner, has surprising results as, overwhelmingly, participants refused to obey authority. I argue that the experiments were well orchestrated studies in obedience under pressure, but that, friends were able to resist even such a forceful influence to obey authority. I present an Aristotelian account of friendship as a character trait, discuss how character traits interact with situations, relate these theoretical accounts to the findings of the RC condition and conclude that friendship is a dispositional trait, one which ensures that friends behave in a predictable manner even under conditions of strain. This conclusion is predicted by philosophical accounts of friendship and supported by the empirical evidence of the RC condition – a variation of the Milgram experiment that is little discussed amongst psychologists and virtually unknown amongst philosophers.

KEYWORDS: friendship; situationism; dispositions; Aristotle

PUBLIC SIGNIFICANCE PAPER: This paper discusses what conclusions we should draw from the Relationship Condition variation of the Milgram experiments and what implications these conclusions have for the philosophical understandings of character, virtue and friendship. It formulates a response to the situationist challenge in philosophy, namely the idea that evidence from psychology shows that situational variables, rather than character traits, affect behaviour.

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*Introduction*

Stanley Milgram’s obedience experiments are famous well beyond the academic boundaries of experimental psychology. Their surprising and even shocking conclusion that perfectly ordinary, presumably moral people can and will act in a morally abhorrent manner at the behest of someone in authority, have guaranteed their enduring appeal. Not only do perfectly nice people do horrible things when ordered to do so, but seemingly inconsequential details such as the experimenter’s lab coat or clip board, add even greater persuasiveness to his authority. Relatively recently Gilbert Harman (Harman 1999) and John Doris (Doris 2002) have brought the experiments to the forefront of philosophical discussions by suggesting that evidence from these and other psychological experiments throws doubts on the existence of character traits and thus makes virtue ethics (as well as other theories that rely on virtues and character traits) unrealistic because they are based on implausible assumptions about human psychology.

Harman’s claim is more direct: our moral intuitions about character attributions, the assumption that people act from fixed and predictable character traits, are wrong. He argues that the usual virtues and vices do not exist and there may not even be such a thing as character. Empirical studies that seek to test how people’s behaviour reflects their character, find that there is no such thing as character. It is the environment, the situation, that shapes behaviour rather than character dispositions.

Doris’s claim and its relation to psychological and philosophical accounts of dispositions, is more difficult to untangle. Doris accepts that there is evidence for most character traits, but he sees these as very specific to situations because they lack any cross-situational consistency – a position he describes as ‘interactionist’ (Doris, 2002, 24-26). As such his account of ‘dispositions’ is at odds with both Aristotelian virtue ethics but also of psychological accounts of dispositions. For example, Doris’s interactionist stance differs significantly from Mischel’s work on complex cognitive and affective patterns of behaviour that are the result of complex interactions between situations, cognitions and behaviours (Mischel, 1973, 265). What Doris accepts as dispositions are, in any other terms of the debate, not particularly dispositional. In a wonderfully clear paper, Russell argues that the entire philosophical debate on situationism and virtue ethics is based on a misconception. When psychologists refer to dispositionalism they set out a theory which no one in virtue ethics has ever defended (Russell D.C. 2014). Engaging in interdisciplinary work presents its own challenges, not least of all the problem of cross disciplinary consistency in terminology. The situationism debate is a case in point for potential miscommunications. In an ironic example of the tail wagging the dog, a survey of possible theoretical positions on the relationship between dispositions and situations in the psychological literature, lists Harman and Doris as the only example for the claim that moral behaviour is totally determined by the situation (Aquino et al. 2009). The term ‘dispositionalism’ does not therefore seem to translate directly between the two disciplines. At the same time, psychological situationism, is entirely compatible with the claims of virtue ethics and does not make the claims necessary to fuel Harman and Doris’s philosophical situationism (Russell D.C. 2014).

There have been many different responses to the situationist challenge. Some philosophers have argued that the conception of character that Harman and Doris argue against does not correspond to how virtue ethicists conceive of character (Athanassoulis 2000; Annas 2003; Kamtekar 2004), while others go even further to object that the conception of virtue that Harman and Doris identify as the target of situationism is too simplistic to play a role in any theory (Kupperman 2001; Sreenivasan 2002; Miller 2003). I think there is great merit in many of these responses to Harman and Doris, but in this paper I will take a different approach. Harman and Doris claim that evidence from personality psychology makes their case against the existence of character traits or against the existence of dispositions as robust, cross-situational traits. Aside from what virtue ethics or situationism might have to say, it seems to me that the evidence itself doesn’t make Harman and Doris’s case. I will show how the Milgram experiment, cited by Harman and Doris as evidence for the non-existence of character/non-existence of robust dispositions, makes the opposite point.

I want to re-examine the Milgram experiments, especially in the light of new information regarding a variation of the experiment that has received no attention from philosophers. I will argue that rather than confirming the situationist claim, this variation offers evidence of dispositions affecting behavior. I will present the evidence from the lost variation, discuss the design of the Milgram experiments, briefly develop an account of what is a character trait and how it might interact with situations and finally draw some conclusions that bring all these empirical and philosophical thoughts together and suggest that dispositions exist and do influence behavior.

The wider aims of this paper, then, are three-fold. Firstly, I would like to consider the implications of the last variation of the Milgram experiment from a philosophical perspective. Secondly, I would like to challenge the claims of the philosophical situationist in so far as they are based on evidence from experimental psychology. And thirdly, I would like to, hopefully, encourage my reader to aspire to a more nuanced interaction between philosophy and psychology, one which recognizes the full complexities of psychological findings before drawing any hard conclusions for philosophy. I think these aims are of interest to both philosophers and psychologists, especially those researchers who are motivated to draw connections between the two fields.

A final word of warning before, I finally, proceed with the argument: the notions of character, disposition, virtue and friendship I will be using in this paper are philosophical and have their roots in how Aristotle and later virtue ethicists have understood them – they will be unrecognizable to psychologists. I apologize for this and I think much can be said about exactly how we carry out interdisciplinary work in a manner that is comprehensible to both disciplines, but in this case my aim mirrors that of Harman and Doris: to make use of empirical work in order to draw philosophical conclusions and because of this I think I am justified in relying on philosophical concepts of these notions.

*The Milgram Experiments*

Milgram’s research involves two volunteers participating in an experiment on how punishment affects learning. The Teacher volunteer asks questions which the Learner volunteer might answer correctly or incorrectly. If the Learner gets the answer wrong the Teacher is encouraged by the Experimenter to administer an electric shock which gets progressively stronger, even reaching a point where the electric shock dial suggests there is a danger of harm to the Learner. The Learner reacts as if the shocks are indeed very painful, but a surprising number of Teachers continue to shock the Learner at the behest of the Experimenter who is standing nearby. As it turns out the Learner is an actor, and this is an experiment in obedience; an experiment on the Teacher’s willingness to do as he is told even when what he is being told to do seems to cause harm to an innocent person.

Milgram describes 19 variations of the experiment in his book *Obedience to Authority* (Milgram 1974). Exactly how many variations there are and how many of them are relevant in the analysis of the data seems to be a matter of interpretation (Haslam 2014). Some experiments varied the physical distance between the Learner and the Teacher or between the Teacher and the Experimenter, others used female participants, more than one Teachers, a lay person instead of a scientist and others changed the venue from the prestigious Yale University to the less awe inspiring “Research Associates of Bridgeport” institute (Milgram 1974: 66-70). However, one version of the experiment was never published by Milgram and is hardly reported in the psychological literature:[[1]](#footnote-1) condition 24, the Relationship Condition (RC).

In the spring of 1962 Milgram conducted two final versions of his experiment, the Bridgeport condition which tested the effects of institutional context on obedience and the RC. The RC involved two participants who had known each other for at least 2 years, so the Learners included a neighbour, a friend from work, and in three cases a relative, a son, a brother-in-law and a nephew. While the Bridgeport condition, where the Learner was a stranger, had a 48% obedience result (19 out of 40), and Milgram’s strongest obedience results go up to 65% (condition 5), the RC had a 15% obedience result (3 out of 20) (Rochat and Modigliani 1997: 237), reversing Milgram’s conclusions from the other versions. The Bridgeport condition was published in Milgram’s 1969 book, but the RC was not discovered until the opening of the Stanley Milgram Papers at Yale University (Rochat and Modigliani 1997, Perry 2012: loc 2728 and Russell N. 2014: 195). Milgram’s notes on the RC claim it is “as powerful a demonstration of disobedience than [sic] can be found” (Quoted from the Yale Archives in Perry 2012: loc. 3097 and Russell N. 2014: 202). I won’t speculate on Milgram’s motives for choosing not to publish these results[[2]](#footnote-2), but I think that their conclusions are extremely interesting as is the difference in disobedience levels in the RC condition. Why did so many RC participants find it possible to disobey the demands of authority? To answer this question, we need to ask a wider one: what do the Milgram experiments show?

Experiments used to make the situationist case against character/robust dispositions, are often presented by philosophers as highlighting the superficiality of the tiny changes that lead participants to obey immoral commands. We assume we are decent, moral beings, but it turns out that even a tiny factor like an experimenter wearing a grey coat and carrying a clipboard, themselves seemingly inconsequential symbols of authority, are enough to tip us into gross immorality. Doris, for example, draws repeated attention to how *small* situational variations have such a significant impact on behaviour, and how disconcerting it is to discover the influence of these factors after the fact – these tiny, seemingly inconsequential details, that we typically pay little attention to and couldn’t identify even if we wanted to, affect behaviour in a dramatic manner (Doris 2002: 36). So, the critique is not just that situational factors influence behaviour, but that tiny, seemingly inconsequential, easy to ignore situational variables, radically change behaviour.

This narrative is part of the usual presentation of the Milgram experiments in the philosophical literature which takes its cue from Harman and Doris’s interpretations, however I am not certain it is entirely correct. The Milgram experiments are not just studies in obedience, they are studies in obedience under pressure. They were designed to both exert pressure on participants to obey, and went on to develop further ways of pressuring participants to obey as the different variations were evolved. Consider the setup of the experiments; Milgram designed his experiments within a research culture that had few ethical qualms about deceiving and manipulating participants (Perry 2012: loc 915) and following in the footsteps of his mentor’s Solomon Asch’s work on group coercion (Russell 2010: 780). His archives tell the story of an experiment that was repeated and refined several times before the first recorded participant ever walked into the room. Pilot studies and pre-tests allowed Milgram to improve his set up to ensure the maximum amount of pressure was exerted on the participants. Early versions of the experiment were set up to use groups to coerce participants into behaviour they would not otherwise do, and Milgram took the idea of group coercion and generalised it into what he later called ‘binding factors’ (Milgram 1974: 148-9). ‘Binding factors’ are “forces that powerfully bind a subject to his role” (Milgram 1974: 149) and include the sequential nature of the requested action as well as creating social obligations and building anxiety, all of which are set up as barriers to disobedience. Milgram also knew from earlier runs of the experiment that participants would feel tension at hurting innocent others and he needed mechanisms to defuse this tension before it stopped the participants from obeying – these he termed ‘strain-resolving mechanisms’ (Milgram 1974: 153-64). For example, Milgram set up the fake script of the experiment to involve academic research into learning, a goal which contributes to a social good and would, therefore, be more difficult to resist[[3]](#footnote-3). Milgram himself writes that the results of his experiments are generalisable to other social situations because the experiment involved “…carefully constructing a situation that captures the essence of obedience – that is, a situation in which a person gives himself over to authority and no longer views himself as the efficient cause of his own action.” (Milgram 1974: .xx). Russell highlights another important revision in the design of the experiments: the shock machine labelling was changed from “LETHAL” to the far more ambiguous “XXX”, because Milgram was concerned that making the potential harm too explicit would put Teachers off from pressing the button to the end (Russell 2010). The experiments were constructed to elicit obedience[[4]](#footnote-4).

Furthermore, the theatricality of the experiments themselves, for instance the careful and detailed realistic design of the shock machine (Russell 2011), added to the effect as did improvisations by Milgram’s accomplice who was running the experiments in his role as Experimenter. Mr. Williams, a thirty-one year old biology teacher, was Milgram’s accomplice and played the role of the Experimenter, the authority figure who prompted the Teacher to continue with the experiment. The Experimenter is described by Milgram as being tasked with giving four prompts:

1. “Please continue.”
2. “The experiment requires that you continue.”
3. “It is absolutely essential that you continue.”
4. “You have no other choice, you must go on.”

and ending the experiment after further disobedience (Milgram 1974: 21). However, examination of the recordings of Milgram’s experiments in the Yale Archives reveal that the Experimenter went much further than the four prompts. Perry discusses how, while in the early tapes of condition 3, Williams quickly terminated the experiment after the Teacher resisted the fourth prompt, by later variations Williams can be heard going completely off script. He addresses the Learner further, telling him to relax and commanding both Teacher and Learner to continue (Perry 2012: loc 2233-2043). In his notes, Williams records that he insisted numerous times (up to 26 times) with multiple participants that they should continue, implying that they could not leave until the experiment was over and, on one occasion when a Teacher switched off the machine, he switched it back on (Perry 2012: loc 2043-2053). Russell describes Williams’s approach as “progressively more coercive” and designed to bring about obedience (Russell N. 2014: 182).

The Milgram experiments then are not so much proof of how *inconsequential* details affect behaviour, but rather they form an elaborate set up, designed and executed to exert considerable pressure to obey. Doris’s account of tiny, inconsequential factors exerting an unexpected pressure to obey is not a justified conclusion given the details of what actually happened in the run up and during the Milgram experiments. This insight is interesting in itself, as well as having implications for our understanding of the experiments in general. It is also of particular interest with respect to the RC condition. The experiments were designed and run to exert pressure on participants to obey and *yet* the RC Teachers resisted this pressure. Their resistance and their reactions to the Experimenter’s urgings to harm their friends and family were intense. One Teacher had doubts about the experiment and refused to believe the shocks were real, but nonetheless his connection to the Learner was so strong that he was not willing to take the chance they might be real (Russell N. 2014: 204). He refused to shock his friend, even though he thought the whole thing was probably a setup. Another participant became “so intent on ending the experiment and reaching his friend through the locked door that the experimenter hurriedly ended the experiment” (Russell N. 2014: 207). Why did the RC participants manage to resist authority, why did they react so strongly against the suggestion that they harm their friends, what does this tell us about the Milgram experiment and how does it impact on the situationist claim that it is situational manipulations rather than cross-situational dispositions that shape behaviour?

*Character traits*

The difference in the RC condition is the relationship between Teacher and Learner, so it seems reasonable to suppose that something about the relationship, the friendship or familiar relationship, helped the participants resist the pressure exerted by the experiments. What is friendship, how does it help in resisting authority and is it a situational or a dispositional factor?

Aristotle tells us that friendship is a virtue or it implies virtue[[5]](#footnote-5) (NE 1155a 1-3). It is a kind of affection, one that requires intimate acquaintance (NE 1166b 30), that is reciprocated, and which involves awareness of the reciprocal feelings and a wish for the good of the friend for her own sake (NE 1155b 27ff). We feel goodwill towards friends, we are aware of these feelings and we are aware that the source of these feelings are the lovable qualities of the friend (NE 1156a 1-5) but we also feel friendship towards those we do not strictly choose such as family members and fellow citizens (NE Book 8, xii).

Is friendship, thus conceived, a character trait? The answer to that question depends on how we understand character traits. Our character is both part of who we are and indicative of who we are; that is, it is a way of being that is, typically, expressed in action. For Aristotle, our character is indicative of who we are because it comprises not just of the natural tendencies we happen to be born with but, crucially, of the settled dispositions that express the values we endorse (Athanassoulis 2005: 37-43). Aristotle defines virtue as a purposive disposition, lying in the right reason (NE 1106b35- 1107a 2), which suggests that it is not a tendency to act by accident, or mistakenly, or for the wrong reasons, but that it is an expression of cultivated and chosen dispositions. Cultivated dispositions are the result of deliberation and choice, an affective/cognitive affirmation of the noble and the good (NE 1139b 3-5) and the product of a long period of development and education. Thus, a kind person is a person who has chosen kindness for its own sake, is sensitive to the requirements of the world that demand a kind response, has the corresponding kind desires that ensure her deliberations flow smoothly and easily into action, has the steadfastness to remain kind under challenging conditions as well as the practical know how to be effectively kind in different contexts.

This account of virtue, choice and cultivation may appear unusual and perhaps even inadequate, especially to readers familiar with the concepts from the point of view of psychology. It is, indeed, a very rushed summary of a wider question, one which Aristotle spends most of the *Nicomachean Ethics* addressing. In brief, the book develops an account of the good life in tension between reason, choice and virtue on the one hand, and the uncontrollable forces of luck on the other. Our very understanding of morality requires that the agent exercises control over his actions – attributing moral responsibility is meaningless unless there is control. On the other hand, a conception of the moral life as rigidly under the control of reason is problematically unrealistic. Aristotle treads a delicate path between the significance of choice and the acknowledgement that the good life is a delicate and vulnerable aim, one which can be easily side-tracked by forces out of control. Cultivating virtue is a long and difficult process, subject to many different influences which we cannot hope to control. The road to virtue is not just about choice but all the factors which make choice possible (or hinder it entirely). These include a number of interesting psychological phenomena such as the potentially helpful nature of good habits, the influences of role models, the perplexing nature of weakness of will, etc. I cannot hope to give a full account of all these ideas here, but I will try to give as much background to the philosophical ideas I use in this paper as possible to facilitate engagement with readers whose background is mainly in psychology.

This Aristotelian idea of character as purposefully dispositional is mirrored in more recent accounts of character. Kupperman writes that “…to have a character is to act in such a way that the person one is plays a major role in any explanation of one’s behaviour.” (Kupperman 1991: 7). Character involves patterns of thought and corresponding actions in situations that demand those actions and we cannot understand the character of a person until we look beyond the actions to the beliefs that give rise to them (Kupperman 1991: 7, Miller 2013: ch. 1, Besser-Jones 2014: 85-87). So, character is concerned with action but the actions reveal something important about the person acting.

The relationship between character traits and behaviour then in complex. On the one hand, there is a deep connection between character and behaviour. To say that a character trait is a disposition is to say that to have this trait is to tend to, under certain circumstances, act in a particular way[[6]](#footnote-6). It would be perplexing to claim that someone was truly disposed to be kind if they, ceteris paribus, never acted kindly when kindness was the appropriate response. To be kind is to hold the kind of values, beliefs and desires that lead you to act kindly when kindness is required. The ‘ceteris paribus’ qualification is, of course, significant. A variety of factors may affect one’s ability to express one’s character in action. Practical obstacles, such as a physical inability to act, or uncertainty as to what counts as the kind response in this complex situation, may impede one’s recognition that kindness is required and one’s sincere desire to be kind. Specific circumstances, such as great temptations, significant pressures, or forceful coercion may waylay good intentions, while personal weaknesses may lead us astray. The ‘ceteris paribus’ qualification captures the many reasons one’s character does not always flow smoothly into action. How can we reconcile then the idea of dispositions as stable, reliable and predictable, with the very real possibility that one’s character won’t flow easily and smoothly into action and even in some situations that dispositions won’t flow into action at all? How is it possible that dispositions are not always dispositional?

The answer is that stability, reliability and predictability are characteristic of dispositions but only of stable, reliable and predictable dispositions. There are many more character traits than the settled, stable and reliable ones. The virtues are settled, stable and reliable character traits[[7]](#footnote-7). They have these features because they involve deliberative choice, habituated desires, practical know-how and are underpinned by practical wisdom; the expert, skilful moral judgement that makes sense of the complexity of particulars that give rise to choice[[8]](#footnote-8). Virtue is excellence so the virtues are not vulnerable to the ‘ceteris paribus’ concerns[[9]](#footnote-9). However, other types of character traits may differ from the virtues and lack their stability, reliability and predictability.

Consider the possibility of weakness of will. The very concept of continence, the successful defeat of contrary desires by the right reason which results in the right action, is a concept in flux. Any battle that is won, might have been lost in other circumstances; any ongoing war against contrary desires is made up of many victories and defeats. The person who is battling against contrary desires will develop, overtime, from being predominantly incontinent to begin with, to becoming predominantly continent as she matures. Continence involves instability and therefore carries with it the possibility of failure and reversion to incontinence during particularly challenging situations. Unlike virtue, continence and incontinence are, by definition, states in flux, vulnerable to the situations the agent finds himself in. We cannot depend on the continent to remain continent under pressure as this type of steadfastness is exactly what is lacking in his character and what distinguishes him from the virtuous.

Similarly to continence and incontinence, the long and difficult process of character development will involve many states of character that are immature and vulnerable to circumstances; states of character whose connection to specific actions is not guaranteed. These might include character traits which lack integrity or display alienation, those that involve immature moral judgement, and so on. While the person of virtue, of mature kindness, can be relied upon to act kindly in all circumstances, the person who is still developing in respect to the character trait of kindness will be vulnerable to circumstances that perplex, tempt or coerce him into unkindness. Given how long, complex and difficult the process of moral development can be, we should expect that most people will be, for most of the time and with respect to most of the virtues, on the road to virtue. That is, they will be on a developmental journey that involves instability and change, progress and regression. Most people are unlikely to have stable, settled and reliable dispositions in all aspects of their character. When and how character traits that appear otherwise stable, change according to circumstances, depends on the circumstances; it is the circumstances that make uncharacteristic behaviour more likely (Kupperman 1991: 4).

One reason, therefore, why understanding character traits is challenging, is that there are different types. Another may have to do with the conflation of two different discussions. One discussion has to do with the definition of character traits as dispositions, attitudes or perhaps some other candidate. The other discussion has to do with the idea of strength of character. Some character traits correlate with strength of character, but not all do so. Continence is the trait of character that most fully corresponds with the idea that one needs strength of character to do the right thing. Doing the right thing may be challenging, perhaps because it requires self-sacrifice, or resoluteness in the face of temptation, or refusal to give into pressure. Incontinence, on the other hand, is a dispositional trait of the weak willed, those who lack strength of character. Strength of character is definitionally related then to how one reacts to situations, situations that introduce pressure, temptations and other difficulties. To say that someone has a strong character is to say that they are not (easily) swayed by situational pressures, temptations and other difficulties. However, strength of character is not necessarily related to moral goodness. One can exhibit strong commitment to certain values and the ability to instantiate them in action despite obstacles, without possessing the right values in the first place. For example, one can display a strong commitment to cruelty and an admirable ability to remain cruel despite adverse circumstances. What is admirable (if anything is admirable in such a situation) is the steadfastness of commitment to the value, not the commitment or the value. It seems to me then that there are good reasons to keep the question of how we understand character traits separate from the question of the strength of specific character traits in a particular person.

Interestingly, the Aristotelian analysis of virtue takes it beyond the question of strength of character. The virtuous agent has arrived at the end of a long developmental journey where strength of character, understood as the ability to withstand contrary desires, temptations, pressure, etc., is no longer necessary. Virtue flows freely and smoothly into action without having to overcome obstacles. The commitment to virtue is such that the trait operates above situational factors that are tempting, pressuring, coercive, etc to the less than virtuous[[10]](#footnote-10). It is only this character trait, virtue, that exhibits situation-independent reliability and stability. All other developmental character states will be, more or less, susceptible to situational factors.

To add to this rather complicated theoretical picture, when we assess someone else’s character, we typically only have access to her behaviour. This is especially true in a laboratory setting where we only see evidence of a narrow range of behaviours under very specific circumstances. We must draw inferences about the person’s character from the behaviours we observe. And here is where a complex conception of character can lead us to trouble. Observing someone acting kindly tells us nothing about whether they did so by accident, mistakenly, in order to please the experimenter, after having defeated contrary desires, because they were having a good day, and so on, or because they saw a need to be kind and made a choice to be kind (Athanassoulis, 2000). Participants may be mistaken or confused about what they observe, about what is required of them, about how to manage competing moral demands, and so on, but we don’t know this from the behaviour we observe.

Furthermore, if we are interested in the stability and reliability of character traits, drawing inferences about character traits from one instance is problematic. Presumably a character trait that manifests itself reliably and stably will need to be examined over a long period of time in a variety of different situations (Kupperman 1991: 162). What counts as stability crucially also depends on how we understand the interaction between character and situations. From the point of view of an external observer, a participant who sometimes does the wrong thing and sometimes fails to do so, is unstable. But if we consider what is going on when this participant interacts with the environment and see that in all cases he is engaged in a struggle, then there is much greater consistency present here. This participant is *consistently* challenged by features in his environment and is engaged in a long-term struggle to do the right thing. Sometimes he wins this struggle, sometimes he loses, but the inconsistency is the behaviour not the struggle; the struggle is consistent and reliable. Nonetheless this internal struggle is difficult to observe, quantify and compare in a laboratory setting.

One conclusion we can draw is that character traits are connected to situational factors and the connections between the two are complex and multifaceted. Firstly, who we are influences how we view the world. A fearful person might view a gesture as threatening where a confident person might dismiss it as incidental (Aristotle, Rhetoric 1378a8). How we perceive the world depends on how attuned we are to different aspects of it, and how we interpret the significance of these situational factors depends on our unique perspective. Secondly, how situations affect character traits depends on the kind of character trait we are considering. Given that character traits develop during a long process of gradual education, habituation and practice, they are likely to be more vulnerable to situational factors during this time. Stable, reliable and dependable character traits are the end goal, and these are the kinds of character traits that can resist pressure, dismiss coercion and shrug off temptations. But there is a long and complex road that leads to the stability of virtue; character traits on the road to virtue, like continence and incontinence, are more vulnerable to situational factors at different times during this journey. Thirdly, context seems to make a difference to whether dispositions or situational manipulations will influence behaviour. In novel, formal and public contexts, with detailed and complete instructions, offering little or no choice, of brief duration and with narrowly defined responses, manipulations are more influential. Whereas in familiar, informal and private contexts, with general or no instructions, offering considerable choice, of extensive duration and broadly defined responses, traits are more influential (Buss 1989: 1381 and Athanassoulis 2013 and 2016). To fully understand a character trait we need to observe its manifestation (as well as its development) over a long period of time and in a variety of different situations.

In the final part of this paper, I will take the insights of the discussion on character traits above and see if they can help us understand the results of the RC condition.

*Friendship and situationism*

If friendships are dispositional traits, we should expect them to influence the way we view the world, to interact with situational factors while exhibiting a degree of stability in the face of pressure, temptation, etc. and to do all these things over a long period of time. Philosophical accounts of friendship, while differing in the details, all agree that friendship is a dispositional trait. While there are many different accounts of friendship they all share the conception of a special relationship, one that is possible due to the particular nature of the friend and one which is nurtured over a long period of time. To take just a few examples, Thomas accounts for the goodwill we feel towards friends by understanding friendship as a kind of intimacy that we develop after a long period of mutual self-disclosure, so he views friendship as a long-term project which has a very characteristic nature (Thomas 1989, 1993). Tefler bases his account of friendship around a sense of a bond with the friend. Friends share what is important which is why we can trust their assessment of what is important and meaningful in life. This is, clearly, an important and distinctive bond, that takes a long time to cultivate (Teflet 1970-71). Cocking and Kennett take all these ideas even further. They discuss how sustaining a friendship involves developing trust in your friend’s goodwill towards you and accepting that your friend will actively shape your character through interpreting and directing you –a life-long project, of fundamental significance to the friends (Cocking and Kennett 1998 and 2000).

The Milgram experiments arrive at similar conclusions about the influence of friendship, not just in their overwhelming disobedience, but also in the details of the reasons behind this disobedience. The experiments themselves, as well as the debrief discussions carried right after the conclusion of the experiment, give us an insight into how the participants understood and accounted for their friendship motivated disobedience. The exchanges reveal three things: they tell us about the participants’ understanding of the special nature of friendship relationships, they show us their understanding of friendship as an ongoing relationship and they illustrate the extreme emotional reactions that can be provoked in the context of friendships.

The first element revealed by the exchanges during the experiment and debrief is the idea that friendships are special relationships. The friend stands in a privileged position by virtue of the relationship, a position that has characteristic demands in terms of intimacy and accountability. The transcript of the RC condition reveals how the Teachers perceived their relationships to the Learners and how their behaviour was shaped by the relationship (The Milgram Papers). Subject 2421 tried to help his friend of 20 years by emphasising the correct answers even though he also felt obliged to continue an experiment he had accepted payment for. Despite reporting that he found it hard to end the experiment because of his sense of commitment to it, he stopped at 90 volts because of his worries about the effect of the experiment on his friend. The friendship and the friend’s welfare also trumped Subject 2421’s commitment to seeing the experiment through. Subject 2422 accounts for his decision to stop because the Learner asked him to, but, crucially, he emphasises his relationship to the Learner. Where he might have ignored a stranger, he felt bound to listen to his brother-in-law because he is his brother-in-law. Similarly, Subject 2438 appeals to the fact that the Learner is a true and close friend rather than a stranger to explain his disobedience. He explains “For a while it was funny – you know. And then it started getting a bit serious. When he started to yell I thought I was killing him. So then I said, ‘To hell. This ain’t worth it. I ain’t going to do that to my friend out there.’ [Some inaudible – to friend] [little laughter- ‘I put myself in your shoes, too’.]” (The Milgram Papers). Some behaviours, like hurting the friend, are incompatible with friendship, and it is a part of friendship to see things from the point of view of the friend and consider what counts as being in his best interests.

Continuing with this theme, Subject 2425 draws on the personal nature of his relationship with the Learner to explain his disobedience; “…When he started calling to me, then it began to bother me. You know – it became personal. It wasn’t just a test any more. It may be a test to you but this is a person that I know.” (The Milgram Papers). He sees the importance of the experiment to the Experimenter but rejects its importance for him in the context of the friendship; “It may be important to you but not that important to me – for friendship – anyway.” (The Milgram Papers). Subject 2435 makes repeated references to the Learner as ‘his boy’. The claim “That’s my boy” is used again and again as a self-evident reason as to why he will not continue with the experiment. He appeals to the relationship as a reason he won’t be continuing and expects the Experimenter to understand the force of this reason. Similarly, Subject 2439 gives his reason for disobedience to be that *this* is his neighbour and expects this reason not only to be understood but to stand alone without further argument or support.

A theme emerges from these debriefs. We stand in a special relationship towards our friends, engaging in the friendship means behaving in preferential ways towards friends, the rules of conduct towards friends being determined by our very understanding of the relationship. The friendship shapes values, accounts for commitments and justifies behaviour.

The second element to emerge from the debriefs is the ongoing nature of friendship. At the conception of this variation Milgram made it a condition of the recruitment that the pairs of participants should have known each other for at least 2 years. It is difficult to imagine an account of friendship that is not diachronic. A claim to friendship based on a very brief acquaintance seems implausible to say the least. Friendship is the kind of interpersonal relationship that can only be cultivated over time and requires intimate knowledge of the friend. The Subjects refer to this diachronic aspect of friendship directly. Subject 2425 refuses to accept the Experimenter’s prompt that he has no other choice but to continue. He replies “Why? Why don’t I have a choice? He is screaming. I can’t continue doing this. I have to face this guy (More yells). I have to be with him. He is my neighbour. I can’t go on with this.” (The Milgram Papers). For Subject 2425 this is not simply a practical problem of having to see tomorrow someone he has shocked today, but an understanding of the relationship as having a past, present and future, all of which inform his behaviour towards his friend. Subject 2425 makes a joke on this theme: “It is a horrible feeling. After all, this guy is my neighbour [inaudible]. He’s driving me home. I want him to at least drive me home [little laughter here].” (The Milgram Papers). However inconvenienced Subject 2425 might have been at having to take the bus home, it is not something that could provoke a ‘horrible feeling’. The ‘horrible feeling’ comes from letting down a friend with whom he has an ongoing relationship; to whom he is accountable tomorrow and the day after.

The third element to emerge from the discussions with the participants is their strong emotional reactions to being placed in a situation where they risk the welfare of their friend. Subject 2425 describes being bothered by his friend’s distress and finding that the experiment became personal because of his friend’s pain. Subject 2430’s distress is quite audible on the tapes. He asks Milgram “Has anybody ever personally attacked you? Has that ever happened?” (The Milgram Papers) – clearly Subject 2425 thinks that Milgram’s behaviour is such that it may provoke violence. Our relationship to our friends is such that it invokes strong feelings, feelings of goodwill towards the friend, feelings of protectiveness and concern about his wellbeing, feelings of anger towards anyone who threatens the friend, and so on, all of which seem to be part of the motives fuelling the Teachers’ disobedience.

The Teachers in the RC condition resisted more resolutely the order to harm the friend, they broke off the experiment earlier, they delivered lower intensity shocks, they responded more promptly to the Learner’s request to stop and stopped the experiments directly and effectively (Rochat and Mogigliani, 1997: 238). Their ability to resist authority comes from the kind of thing friendship is: a long term, purposefully cultivated bond of trust and intimacy that centres around a commitment to the wellbeing of the friend. This dispositional account of friendship explains the participants’ disobedience, it underlies their own assumptions about the reasons behind their behaviour and is prevalent in the philosophical accounts of friendship.

*The situationist response*

To my knowledge there is no non-dispositional account of friendship put forward by situationists and I am not aware of any situationists who have discussed the RC condition. However, in the spirit of philosophical charity, I will conclude the paper by attempting to raise, and answering, possible situationist objections to my argument.

The situationist could argue that while we view friendship as dispositional and we discuss friendship as dispositional, perhaps we are all deluded. Perhaps this is a surprising psychological phenomenon, one which mirrors the Fundamental Attribution Error. It leads us all to behave as if friendship is a dispositional trait, when in fact it is not. Perhaps there is no such thing as friendship, we just behave as if there is one; we suffer from the Friendship Delusion.

The problem with the objection that all friendships are a form of delusion or biased reasoning is that it is self-defeating. To begin with, for the delusion to work, two people would have to be deluded about the same thing, i.e. the friendship, and in the same manner, i.e. about the terms and obligations of the friendship. One person being deluded on their own and claiming to be a friend with another couldn’t possibly work in the context of friendship. As soon as the other friend denies the friendship, the original claimant becomes a stalker, not a friend, however loud his protestations at friendship may be. So, we need two people who are equally deluded that they are friends and who behave in ways appropriate to friendship, that is, they behave in such a way that their interactions, commitments and values reinforce the friendship. This makes the delusion assumption self-defeating: friendship is a created relationship, created by the two people who decide to engage in it. The very fact that we engage in friendships, in the way that we do, gives them substance; to *behave* as a friend, is, for all intents and purposes, to *be* a friend. To genuinely care about the welfare of the friend and have reciprocal feelings of intimacy and trust, paradoxically, give legitimacy to those feelings even if their origin is psychological delusions. The act of behaving as a friend, makes one a friend, even if there is no such thing as friendship. Friendship is created and it can be created out of the delusion of friendship, as long as both parties are equally deluded and continue to behave in a way consistent with the delusion of friendship.

The situationist could retort that while we are not deluded when we assume that friendships influence behaviour, we are mistaken about the source of the influence: friendship is a situational, not a dispositional factor. Doris seems to suggest that friendship can be understood a situational factor. He writes:

…nothing I’ve said contradicts the thought that people help most, and are most helped by, the ones they know and love. Where social ties exist, helping is very likely more reliable than among strangers. At the risk of churlishness, however, I cannot resist cautionary observations: Lovers cheat, siblings fight, and parents are unresponsive. More importantly, the situationist can grant even strong claims for the consistency of prosocial behavior in ongoing relationships, for surely the explanation here is substantially situational: Relationships underwrite affective ties and reciprocal structures that facilitate helping behavior. (Doris 2002: 35)

In short, friendship is not a dispositional trait, it is a situational variable that, fairly consistently, produces predictable results.

However, Doris’s account of friendship is problematic within the wider context of situationism. Firstly, it does away with the claim that situational factors are ‘seemingly insubstantial’ (Doris 2002: 36). Situational influences are no longer tiny, inconsequential factors like grey coats and clipboards, but friendships, substantial relationships which play a major role in the lives and the wellbeing of the friends. We are not surprised to hear that a friend showed a particular kindness to her friend, or treated her preferentially, in the same way that we were surprised to hear that a grey coat gave an experimenter a decisive air of authority. Not only are we not surprised by the effect of friendships in our lives, but we expect this kind of effect as part of our understanding of friendship. If I were to describe a friend as repeatedly disloyal, generally unavailable when I needed him and flippant about disclosing my most personal secrets, one would not conclude that the situational variable of friendship is having a changeable influence in different instances, but rather that friendship is altogether absent – this is not a friend.

Harman, in a later piece, tones down the strength of his critique of character. He writes:

No one supposed that these two experiments [Good Samaritan and Milgram] , taken by themselves, show that there are no character traits. What they show is that aspects of a particular situation can be important to how a person acts in ways that ordinary people do not normally appreciate, leading them to attribute certain distinctive actions to an agent’s distinctive character rather than to subtle aspects of the situation. (Harman 2003: 91)

However, friendship is not ‘an aspect of a particular situation’, it is a relationship chosen and chosen for its own sake, committed to, developed and nurtured over a long period of time. It is a relationship which is not only appreciated by the people engaged in it, but one which is consciously chosen for what it is. And while this relationship can change, falter, be betrayed or be abandoned, this doesn’t change the fundamental nature of what it is: dispositional rather than situational.

It is important to note here that situationists may well be failing to grasp what friendship is. Harman cites as evidence for the non-existence of character traits a quote by psychologist Ziva Kunda in which she claims: “There is surprisingly little consistency in people’s friendliness, honesty, or any other personality trait from one situation to other, different situations…” (Harman 2009: 2). Kunda’s empirical conclusions on friendliness may well be correct, but they do not affect the dispositional nature of friendship. This is because friendliness is quite a different attitude from friendship. Friendliness is an affective attitude, either the result of unreflective natural tendencies or a purposefully cultivated disposition (based on prudential calculations, for example), but one which has an indiscriminate target. Friendliness is not aimed at the person chosen for her valued qualities; it is a blanket attitude that characterizes how one approaches (almost) all others. Given its indiscriminate target, one’s feelings of friendliness may fluctuate depending on one’s mood, surroundings, past history, etc. While friendship is targeted and stable, friendliness is indiscriminate and capricious, and therefore, more vulnerable to situational variables.

Another variation of this objection of friendship as a situational manipulation could argue that friendship is not the most plausible explanation for why the participants behaved as they did in the experiments. Perhaps a different account can be given, one which stresses psychological biases, such as a personal connection, an in-group association, or a social tie, as the situational factors that altered behaviour. Or that friendship is simply a primer for relevant situational factors, e.g. being a friend is more likely to trigger psychological biases making it easier for the Teacher to empathise with the Learner. Several variations of Milgram’s experiments suggest that similar psychological biases pull or push towards different behaviours. For example, compliance is higher in variations where the Learner is out of sight and can’t communicate directly (Milgram, 1974, 32-34) and Milgram speculates that had women or children been used in the role of Learner, compliance would have dropped (Milgram, 1974, 63). The situationist could then argue that it is not friendship that is significant here as a dispositional factor, but rather friendship is a collection of psychological biases which happen to gather situational influences which facilitate resisting authority. Or that participants acted the way they did because of an in-group preference rather than friendship as a disposition.

In response, it seems to me that there is nothing problematic about accepting that friendships are the kinds of relationships that bring certain qualities of the friend qua friend to the forefront of one’s consciousness and reasoning, in a way that is psychologically relevant. To be a friend is to be perceived differently by your friends, to affect the way they behave in particular ways, to trigger specific psychological reactions, usually those associated with heightened empathy and moral responsiveness. Psychological biases such as a personal connection are part of what it means to be a friend since friendship involves placing the friend in a privileged position.

Replacing friendship with in-group membership reveals another terminological pitfall between philosophers and psychologists. Psychologists do not view friendship as a disposition, while for many philosophers since Aristotle, it is a paradigmatic case. However, psychological understandings of in-group attachments have dispositional features. Numerous studies of role modelling influences within in-groups show a persistent, stable and long-term effect of in-group peers on behaviour. From aggressivity (Bandura, 1965), to littering (Cialdini et al, 1990), to conserving water (Aronson and O’Leary, 1983), to cheating and dishonesty (Gino et al, 2003), the example of those perceived as belonging in the same group influences behaviour consistently and predictably. So, whether we understand friendship philosophically or whether we understand it psychologically as an in-group affiliation, we arrive at the same conclusion.

The second problem with a situational conception of friendship is that it questions our understanding of what counts as a situational variable in the first place. If a situational variable can become as broad and reliable as an on-going and deep relationship what constitutes a situation threatens to become arbitrary[[11]](#footnote-11) and/or so wide as to be indistinguishable from a disposition. Dispositions are supposed to be broad and influence a wide range of behaviours, situations are narrow and context specific. If situational factors can be stretched to include life- long commitments like friendships, they blur the distinction between them and dispositions. And if situations can be as broad and wide ranging as dispositions, the entire debate collapses.

One final objection by the situationist might be to concede the point with respect to friendship but still think that this doesn’t give us any reason to expand the conclusion to other supposedly robust character traits. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to make the wider argument, I would like to hint at a possible way forward. Friendship is not a morally isolated phenomenon. It is not separate from other virtues like loyalty, kindness, courage and justice. To be a friend, is also to be kind, loyal and fair. In refusing to shock their friends, the Teachers were not just friends, they were also loyal, kind, courageous and fair. It may then be that by making the case for friendship, we are also partway towards making the case for the robustness of other character traits.

*Conclusion*

The situationist critique of character has been extremely influential in philosophy, however, I think the resulting debate has missed out on the real importance of the evidence from psychology. The Milgram experiments, to take but one example, are valuable not because they show there is no such thing as character/robust dispositions, but because they show the many different types of characters there are and their complex interactions with situational variables at all levels. In the preface to the second edition of his *Obedience to Authority* (Milgram 1983), Milgram bemoans the fact that people distorted his research by focussing on the occurrence of obedience rather than considering *variation* in its occurrence[[12]](#footnote-12). Situationist philosophers are guilty of a similar distortion, they have focused on the perceived non-existence of character traits/robust dispositions rather than on their diversity and the complex role situational variables play in the diverse manifestations of character traits. The RC condition is fully compatible with the results of the other variations, but only if we accept that character traits are complex and that they interact with situations in a variety of ways. Situationists make a blanket claim, the RC condition disproves this claim, but the proponent of character traits should take a more nuanced approach to drawing conclusions from empirical evidence. If we consider the evidence in all its intricate detail, it is entirely compatible with the existence of character traits,[[13]](#footnote-13) as long as we accept that the overall picture is complex and multifaceted. An exclusive focus on dispositions (something which psychologists were guilty of in psychological dispositionalism) is misguided, but equally, reducing all behavioural influences to situations is a mistake (one which philosophers are making in philosophical situationalism).

I would like to conclude with a telling anecdote from the running of the Milgram experiments. In the middle of running the experiments, Milgram hired a new assistant, Bob Tracy, to play the role of Learner in conditions six, eight and ten. Tracy was a physically intimidating person and Milgram wanted to test whether a difference in the appearance of the Learner made a difference to obedience levels. As the experiments went on, Tracy became increasingly concerned about their ethics and their impact on the participants. The final straw was when Milgram recruited an old army friend of Tracy’s to take part as the Teacher. Rather than put his friend through the stressful and possibly harmful obedience experiments, Tracy quit his job (Perry 2012: loc. 3412). Tracy, operating under real conditions of authority, i.e. being employed and paid to do as his boss asked, defied authority for a friend. The RC participants illustrated the power of friendship in experimental conditions, and Bob Tracy confirmed the same lesson in real life.

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1. The only academic discussions of the RC condition I could find are Rochat and Modigliani 1997, Perry 2012, Russell 2014 and, briefly, Haslam 2014. Textbooks also tend to overlook the RC condition. Haslam et al. 2014 report that in their survey of psychology textbooks none acknowledged the effect of the intimacy between Teacher and Learner in the RC condition. Whatever the case amongst psychologists, it is certainly the case that philosophers do not discuss the RC condition – I could not find a single reference to the RC variation in the philosophical literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Perry 2012, found evidence of earlier descriptions by Milgram of the RC condition that were not included in the final book draft, loc. 3086. She speculates that Milgram did not publish these because he realised how contentious the RC condition was, loc. 3086. Russell N. 2014, considers and rejects the idea that the variation was methodologically too different from the others and suggests that Milgram may have been concerned that the RC variation had the greatest potential to harm the participants’ self-image and thus fuel his critics who were concerned about the unethical nature of his experiments. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a discussion of these aspects of Milgram’s research see Perry 2012: ch. 2 and Russell 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. They also seem to have been constructed to elicit *impressive* obedience. A version of the pre-experiment where the Learner offered no feedback resulted in 100% obedience but was dropped from the final experiment. Russell speculates that this was because this result was uninteresting, what Milgram wanted was the theatricality of the conflict (Russell 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. You may have strong views on whether friendship is a distinct virtue in itself or whether it is made up of specific applications of other virtues such as loyalty, trustworthiness, kindness, etc. - the argument that follows applies to either view as well as an amalgam of both. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is an Aristotelian idea but for a modern iteration see Miller 2013: 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Aristotle doesn’t say much on vice other than to say that it is comparable to virtue but, unlike virtue which is oriented towards the noble and the good, vice aims at all that is wrong. Presumably then, the vicious person’s purposeful commitment to vice leads to settled, stable and reliable character traits. NE Book III, section v. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a detailed analysis of phronesis, practical wisdom, see Dunne 2009: ch.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This does not mean that the virtues are impregnable to all external circumstances. Extreme ill fortune, akin to that affecting Priam, may destroy a person’s *eudaimonia* (NE 1100a 5-9), but the virtuous cannot be tempted by contrary desires as these have been habituated to follow reason, they cannot be pressured into vice as they are moved by the conception of the noble and the good, they cannot be tricked by misperceptions as their vision is clear, etc. See also Athanassoulis 2005: Chapters 2, 3 and 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Of course there are other conceptions of virtue that retain the element of struggle, e.g. the Kantian virtue in the empirical character always involves struggle as we feel the constraint of the moral law on finite beings like us, and we feel pain at having our desires supressed. For more on this see Athanassoulis 2005: ch.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Blum makes this point against Doris’s account of situationism, Blum 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Reicher and Haslam 2011, also point out how the literature has failed to engage with this aspect of Milgram’s conclusions. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Russell D.C. 2014 makes this point in a particularly convincing manner. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)