

Filosofia Unisinos
Unisinos Journal of Philosophy
24(1): 1-17, 2023 | e24102

Unisinos – doi: 10.4013/fsu.2023.241.02

Article

An Active Externalism about Personality

Um externalismo ativo sobre a personalidade

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ABSTRACT

People display recognizably characteristic behavioral patterns across time and situations, with a given degree of regularity. These patterns may justify the attribution of personality traits. It is arguably the commonsense view that the proper explanation of these behavioral regularities is given by intrinsic properties of the agent's psychology. In this paper, I argue for an externalistic view of the causal basis of personality-characteristic behaviors. According to the externalistic view, the relevant behavioral regularities are better understood as the result of a systematic interaction between features internal to the agent and environmental-situational factors. Moreover, if the premise is granted that people are typically able to exercise a certain degree of control over the environmental-situational conditions they find themselves in, the resulting picture is of active sort of externalism, as people may at times engage in selection and manipulation of environmental-situational conditions as a way of managing their own behavioral tendencies.

Keywords: Active externalism, personality traits, interactionism.

RESUMO

As pessoas exibem padrões de comportamento característicos reconhecíveis ao longo do tempo e das situações, com um determinado grau de regularidade. Esses padrões podem justificar a atribuição de traços de personalidade. É indiscutivelmente a visão do senso comum que a explicação adequada dessas regularidades comportamentais é dada por propriedades intrínsecas da psicologia do agente. Neste artigo, defendendo uma visão externalista da base causal dos comportamentos característicos da



personalidade. De acordo com a visão externalista, as regularidades comportamentais relevantes são melhor compreendidas como resultado de uma interação sistemática entre características internas ao agente e fatores ambientais-situacionais. Além disso, se for aceita a premissa de que as pessoas normalmente são capazes de exercer um certo grau de controle sobre as condições situacionais ambientais em que se encontram, o quadro resultante é de um tipo ativo de externalismo, pois as pessoas podem às vezes se envolver em seleção e manipulação das condições ambientais-situacionais como forma de administrar suas próprias tendências comportamentais.

Palavras-chave: Externalismo ativo, traços de personalidade, interacionismo.

Introduction

Few topics are more likely to give rise to internalistic intuitions than a reflection on human personality. We ordinarily speak of people being open, conscientious, or extroverted, and it seems natural to assume that personality-characteristic behaviors are for the most part internally driven. The bottom line seems to be that some people just *are* open, conscientious, or extroverted, and if we asked what is it that causes people to behave in these particular ways, most would probably answer that these are intrinsic properties of agents' psychology.

In this paper, I argue that —appearances notwithstanding— there is a forceful case to be made for an externalistic view of personality. People display recognizably characteristic behavioral patterns across time and situations, with a given degree of regularity. Some people are, for instance, more extroverted than others, meaning that they will display extroversion-characteristic behaviors more frequently. On the externalistic view, the causal basis responsible for these behavioral regularities goes beyond individualistic states and processes. Indeed, the relevant behavioral regularities are much better explained as the result of a systematic interaction between features internal to the agent and environmental-situational factors. Moreover, if the premise is granted that people are typically able to exercise a certain degree of control over the environmental-situational conditions they find themselves in, then the resulting picture is of an active externalism, as people may at times engage in selection and manipulation of environmental-situational conditions as a way of managing their own behavioral tendencies.

The plan for the paper is as follows. In the next section I introduce some key terms of personality-talk and some important methodological issues. In section 3, I discuss what I take to be involved in making an externalistic claim on a given psychological phenomenon. Then in sections 4, 5, and 6 I introduce the three steps of my main argument. First, in section 4, I discuss evidence from experiments in Social Psychology that suggests that trait-relevant behavior is to a surprising extent influenced by environmental and situational factors. In section 5, I argue that interactionism is the right approach for an explanation of personality-characteristic behavior. And, in section 6, I argue that the evidence points to this being an active sort of externalism. Finally, in section 7, I look into two important objections that may be raised by a defender of an internalistic account.

1. Setting the stage: what are we talking about when we talk about personality?

Though psychological research into personality has a long empirical record and many well-developed theoretical constructs, it is seldom or never discussed as a topic in the Philosophy of Mind

and adjacent areas¹. So it is worthwhile to start from scratch and briefly introduce some of the main issues involved.

As a first pass, personality traits might be defined as the temporally stable behavioral tendencies in which persons of a similar age differ from one another (Asendorpf, 2009; Pervin, 1994; Wiggins, 1997). The currently most popular theory in Personality Psychology claims that the basic structure of personality traits can be captured in terms of five main personality dimensions, which people display to different degrees: openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (McCrae & Costa, 2008). Topics of central interest for personality psychologists include whether the ‘big five’ dimensions are enough to account for individual behavioral variability (Feher e Vernon, 2021), whether these dimensions constitute a cultural universal (Gurven *et al.*, 2013), how these things might be measured in a way that is test-retest reliable (Gosling *et al.*, 2003)², and the extent to which these measures are predictive of different sorts of relevant outcomes, such as job performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991), education outcomes (Noftle e Robins, 2007), or the likelihood of developing an addiction (Kayi *et al.*, 2016), among others.

A further question of theoretical interest is what exactly is the *causal basis* for the individual differences in behavior that are studied by personality psychologists. That is the philosophical question that will be my focus throughout this paper. Note that a crucial feature of the definition of personality traits introduced above is that it focuses on the relevant behavioral regularities themselves and remains neutral on what their causal basis is. It is probably fair to say that many personality psychologists tend to assume that the causal powers responsible for these behavioral regularities are for the most part internal to the agent, and many surely tend to assume that personality traits just are these internal causal powers. The basic thrust of my argument in what follows will be, on the contrary, that the causal powers behind the relevant behavioral regularities are much better understood as involving a systematic interaction between factors internal and external to the agent. Given the issue under consideration, a premature identification of personality traits with internal features of the agent would be question-begging and so, in what follows, I will refer to the relevant regularities themselves as ‘personality traits’. Though this may initially seem at odds with common usage, I take it that what we mean when we say that someone is extroverted is that this person tends to behave in some particular ways, irrespective of what the correct theory turns out to be concerning the causes of those behavioral patterns. The starting point for the ensuing discussion will thus be the fact that people tend to display certain behavioral regularities in which they differ from one another, in ways that can be recognized and measured. That is the *explanandum* for both internalist and externalist theories about the causal basis of the relevant regularities.

Another tricky point in the above definition surfaces once we try to pinpoint more precisely what regularity or stability amount to. There are several important notes to be made here. First, Personality Psychology is concerned with the study of individual differences in behavior. Thus, trait-talk aims to pick out individual characteristics that stand out against the background of behaviors that may be generally expected over and above individual differences, including general expectations about the behavior of people in the agent’s age group, and about the kinds of behaviors that may be called for in heavily scripted situations. For instance, as a rule people attending a funeral are circumspect, so it would hardly

¹ A couple of exceptions to this rule are (Goldie, 2004; Hovhannisyan & Vervaeke, 2021), though they touch on issues not directly relevant to the argument of this paper. Psychological research on personality is more often a topic of discussion among moral philosophers, as it relates to issues such as the viability of virtue ethics and the reliability of judgements of character (cf. Alfano, 2013; Doris, 2002; Harman, 1999; Merritt *et al.*, 2010; Vranas, 2005). In particular, Doris’ insightful discussion in *Lack of Character* (2002) is arguably the most detailed philosophical treatment of this topic. Endorsing an externalistic view of personality of the sort I put forward here is likely to have implications for morally relevant issues, but these will not be part of the present discussion.

² A word might be in order here concerning empirical methods. Though, on conceptual grounds, trait-talk is, at bottom, talk about behavior, only some of the research on personality relies on direct behavioral observation. Most of the empirical studies in the field are conducted through questionnaires and other such assessment tools, which rely either on self-report or on report by third parties.

count as evidence against a particular person being extroverted that she behaves circumspectly on such occasions. And it does not say much about how intrepid a person is that she no longer chooses to go skiing when she turns ninety. Thus only some of an agent's behavior might be relevant in principle for an assessment of personality traits—I will call these 'trait-relevant' behaviors. Within the set of trait-relevant behaviors, I will refer to some behaviors as 'personality-characteristic', meaning the behaviors that are actually expressive of some trait of someone's personality: someone who is conscientious will display conscientiousness-characteristic behaviors with certain regularity, while someone who is extroverted will display extroversion-characteristic behaviors, and so forth³.

A further critical point in the above definition concerns just how regularly or stably the relevant behaviors need to be displayed in order for the attribution of a trait to be warranted. This is a difficult and highly contested issue that has been the subject of a lively debate within the field, as it concerns major theoretical and methodological decisions. I will come back to this topic in section 5 below. For the moment, a couple of important things should be noted. For one, regularity in this context will always come down to a matter of degree. A person must display *some* degree of behavioral regularity for the attribution of a trait to be warranted, but this will never amount to a perfect regularity—flexibility is a hallmark of human behavior and it is typically possible for people to act out of character. One might have a more 'robust' or a more 'light' understanding of personality traits depending on how strong a degree of regularity one considers to be a requisite for trait attribution (Doris, 2002).

Another important distinction in this context is not between degrees of regularity but between sorts of regularities. As things are usually put, a distinction should be made between a given trait being *temporally stable* and it showing a certain degree of *cross-situational consistency* (Mischel & Peake, 1982). The former sort of consideration concerns the degree of regularity that a person's behavior shows across iterated trials of highly similar circumstances. Considerations of the latter sort concern the degree of regularity that a person's behavior exhibits across differently structured (but still trait-relevant) kinds of situations. In other words, temporal stability refers to regular behaviors within the same situation type, while cross-situational consistency refers to regular behaviors across different situation types. It is certainly conceivable for someone to display a high degree of temporal stability in a given behavior, while failing to exhibit a significant degree of cross-situational consistency. For instance, someone may exhibit a recognizable tendency to be condescending to figures of authority at the workplace (temporal stability), but fail to conform to a similar pattern when responding to authority figures at other kinds of settings (cross-situational consistency). Thus, one might think of a given trait as more 'fine-grained' or as more 'coarse-grained' depending on how broadly one defines the spectrum of situations in which the relevant behavior is displayed.

In later sections, I will put forward a case for an active externalism about personality. I will argue that what drives the expression of a person's personality-characteristic behaviors are not wholly internal factors that admit of an individualistic explanation, but the systematic interaction between features internal to the agent and features of her environment, particularly features of the situations she finds herself in. And I will argue that agents often engage in environmental and situational selection and manipulation as a way of managing their own personality-characteristic behaviors. Before we turn to that story, however, we need to get a firmer grip on what an externalistic view amounts to.

³ Note that the extension of these terms thus defined differs from other uses in the literature, such as Doris' (2002). As I am using these terms, personality-characteristic behaviors turn out to be a subset of trait-relevant behaviors. The rationale for this is that personality-characteristic behaviors are those trait-relevant behaviors that the agent displays with the requisite levels of regularity, as I discuss presently in the main text. The broader category of trait-relevant behaviors includes all those that are in principle relevant to an assessment of individual differences, though these may not be displayed with sufficient regularity to amount to personality-characteristic behaviors.

2. Active externalism

The extant philosophical literature on psychological phenomena comprises many different sorts of externalistic claims (e.g., Clark, 2008b; Clark & Chalmers, 1998; Hurley, 2010; Hutchins, 2014; Hutto & Myin, 2013; Menary, 2010; Noë, 2004; Rowlands, 2010; Sutton, 2010; Wheeler, 2010; Wilson, 2010, among others), so a quick word on what I take to be at stake in this choice of words might be in order.

My present goal is not to put forward a fully developed externalistic theory, but simply to identify a set of widely plausible features of the things we are referring to when we talk about externalistic psychological phenomena. An important reason to favor this strategy is to make my externalistic account of personality attractive to philosophers on different camps within the broader externalistic family. For instance, in recent years a wide-reaching debate has been raging between two groups of theories built from fundamentally different assumptions, as extended functionalism (Clark, 2008a, 2008b; Kiverstein, 2012; Kiverstein & Clark, 2009; Wheeler, 2017) and several sorts of enactive approaches (di Paolo, 2009; Gallagher & Crisafi, 2009; Hutto & Myin, 2013, 2017; Thompson & Stapleton, 2009). My own theoretically light approach to what is involved in formulating an externalistic view is meant precisely to remain neutral on these and other substantive theoretical disputes between different types of externalistic theories.

Further, the following criteria are not meant either as providing necessary and sufficient conditions for any externalistic phenomenon, as there is no way of doing so without endorsing substantial theoretical commitments assuming it is possible at all. For the purposes of the present discussion, it suffices to have some rules of thumb concerning when it might be warranted to make an externalistic claim on some target phenomenon.

My first rule of thumb concerns *explanatory anti-individualism*.

C1. The causal explanation of the relevant feature of the agent's psychology involves the proper contribution of factors beyond individualistic states and processes.

This is plausibly a minimal common core to all externalistic claims. As it stands, it restricts the scope of the discussion to psychological features of the agent (contra di Paolo, 2009; Sterelny, 2010). And it relies on a contrast with individualistic or internalistic explanatory strategies, by which I mean strategies where the agents' internal states and processes are the only properly contributing factors in the causal explanation of the agent's psychological properties. Thus, the formulation of this deceptively simple criterion involves two key sorts of assumptions. On the one hand, it involves an intuitive demarcation between what is 'internal' and what is 'external' to the agent, or what belongs to the agent and what does not. And it also assumes an intuitive distinction between factors properly contributing to the relevant explanations and mere background conditions. I will not discuss these distinctions further here, though both would need to be carefully worked out by a fully developed theory.

Explanatory anti-individualism, by itself, is not enough. One of the prominent criticisms of externalistic views has been the lack of an adequate distinction between causal and constitutive contributions by factors external to the agent (cf. Adams & Aizawa, 2001, 2008; Prinz, 2006, among others). To fail to make such a distinction—the objection goes—would make externalism so ubiquitous it would rob it of any theoretical interest. What exactly is it for a certain external factor to make a constitutive contribution is a difficult issue, and one I will not tackle directly here. However, something more needs to be said concerning the sort of external contribution that is at stake. For present purposes, the following might serve as a first step in that direction:

C2. The relevant external factors play a role in the way the agent's behavior comes about such that, were them not present, (i) the agent would not be able to exercise the capacities involved in the behavior(s) under consideration, or (ii) the agent's normal behavioral profile would be significantly altered.

Again, this is still importantly underspecified. For one thing, much of the work in C2 is done by thick terms 'capacities', 'normal behavior', or 'significantly altered' whose precise meaning is not spelled out, and the counterfactual element involved allows for different interpretations as well. A more pressing concern in the present context is that C1 and C2 still do not seem to yield intuitively correct results as a means of identifying relevant externalistic claims. For instance, exercising the ability to play guitar seems to show the relevant counterfactual dependence on the present availability of a functioning guitar in the agent's surroundings. There might be in the end a good case for the claim that guitar-playing is an externally constituted ability, but still there seems to be something uninformative about that statement. Simply put, the trouble is that there seems to be no point in advertising that guitar-playing constitutively involves the contribution of a guitar.

As a further rule of thumb, I propose to adopt for present purposes the following *non-triviality clause*⁴:

C3. The relevant feature of the agent's psychology is such that there would be some prima facie plausibility to explanations of it that cite only individualistic states and processes as proper contributory factors.

I suggest that C1-C3 give us a rough first approximation to what is involved in putting forward an externalistic view on a certain psychological phenomenon. However, the sort of externalism that concerns me here is an *active externalism* (cf. Clark & Chalmers, 1998). I propose to capture that further element in these terms:

C4. The agent engages in processes of selection, modification or manipulation of environmental structures or conditions as a way of exploiting or augmenting her capacities.

As before, the wording of C4 is chosen to avoid a commitment on certain contentious issues, such as whether the relevant capacities are to be thought of as augmented, as differently instantiated, or as necessarily externally based in every case. Another important thing to note is that it would be implausible to pose a requirement to the effect that the agent engages in the relevant external manipulations with the explicit purpose of exploiting or augmenting her capacities. Consider, for instance, the paradigmatic case of someone performing a calculation with the aid of a pen and a piece of paper. It seems contrived to say that such an agent is picking up paper and pen to augment her mathematical capacities. From her own point of view, she is simply in the business of making a calculation. It suffices in this context that the relevant external manipulation is done purposively and that it plays the requisite role in exploiting or augmenting agential capacities.

These rules of thumb should come out as relatively uncontroversial. If that much is granted, I submit that a successful argument to the effect that a given phenomenon satisfies C1-C4 amounts to at least a *prima facie* successful defense of an active-externalistic claim concerning that phenomenon.

With this background in place, I now turn to my main argument concerning personality traits.

3. Step 1: countering internalistic intuitions on personality

There is substantial evidence that particular instances of trait-relevant behavior may be strongly modulated by environmental or situational factors. Alas, there are also reasons why this in itself is not sufficient for grounding an externalistic claim on personality. However, it does take us one step in that direction, as it raises significant worries for any purely internalistic model of personality-characteristic behavior.

⁴ This useful label is introduced by (Rupert, 2010).

Standard intuition would have it that, when facing similar situations, some people are intrinsically prone to responding in certain ways, while others are intrinsically prone to responding in other ways. Egotistic, money-obsessed William is hardly expected to stop on his way to a business meeting to help a stranger in need, while kind and compassionate Andrea is hardly expected to hurt another person at an experimenter's request. The evidence suggests, however, that how people behave in particular situations is much more externally driven than standard intuitions allow.

There is a wealth of classical experiments in Social Psychology whose common thrust is that the presence or absence of certain situational factors may sometimes be the best predictor of people's behavior. Consider, for instance, Darley and Batson's (1973) classic 'good Samaritan' study. In this experiment, college students on their way across campus to deliver a talk on the parable of the good Samaritan found a stranger laying and grunting on the sidewalk. Whether the subjects would stop to help the stranger in need was not well predicted by any of the administered measures of individual differences. Instead, it showed a significant correlation with how much in a hurry the subjects happened to be: 10% of those who were told they had little time to reach their destination stopped to help, in contrast with the 63% of those who had more available time to reach their destination.

Many other experiments share the same basic design and yield similar results. In the classic experiment by Isen and Levin (1972), the independent variable was subjects unexpectedly finding or not finding a dime in a telephone booth prior to an incident that afforded an opportunity to help a stranger. In Mathews and Canon's (1975), the independent variable was the presence or absence of a potent noise source—a loudly functioning lawn mower—in the vicinity of the incident. As it turns out, the presence or absence of these situational factors was a strong predictor of ensuing behaviors in all these experiments. A similar lesson may be drawn from Latané and Darley's studies on the 'by-stander effect', which support the conclusion that the probability of someone intervening in the context of an apparent emergency decreases dramatically as the number of people witnessing the event increases (Darley & Latane, 1968; Latane & Darley, 1968).

Also pointing to the importance of environmental and situational variables in influencing behavior are many of experiments on social priming. For instance, Bargh, Chen and Burrows (1996) hypothesized that cues leading to the activation of stereotype concepts could have an effect on subjects' immediately subsequent behavior. To test their prediction, they applied a simple priming paradigm. In one experiment, subjects were exposed to politeness- or rudeness-related words during a sentence-forming task, and were then led to a room where they had to wait for an experimenter to give them further instructions. The experimenter, however, was engaged in a long conversation with a third party and failed to pay any attention to the waiting subjects. Less than 20% of the subjects primed with politeness-related stimuli went on to address the experimenter and interrupt the conversation, while over 60% of those who were primed with rudeness-related stimuli did. In a similar vein, a study by Schnall, Haidt, Clore & Jordan (2008) revealed that subjects exposed to a stinking smell and an untidy desk were significantly more severe in their average moral judgements than subjects in the respective control conditions.

Stanley Milgram's (1974) well-known and much discussed—and much replicated—experiments on obedience to authority are also revealing of the extent to which behavior may be influenced by situational conditions. In the basic design, subjects who believed to be taking part in a learning and reinforcement experiment were asked to administer electric shocks to an actor-confederate placed in an adjacent room whenever he gave an incorrect answer to a learning task. Despite the increasingly disturbing protests and cries for the experiment to stop on the part of the actor-confederate, roughly two-thirds of the experimental subjects continue to administer the electric shocks all the way to the end when urged to do so by an insisting but polite experimenter. Given the magnitude of the effect, it is implausible to account for the results in terms of subjects' intrinsic sadistic or aggressive tendencies. The results are arguably better explained by the work of situational pressures.

All these experiments yield counterintuitive results. It is puzzling, from a commonsense perspective, to learn that the strongest predictor of whether someone would stop to help a stranger or not is given by apparently low-relevance situational factors such as whether the person just found a dime in a telephone booth or how loud the ambient noise is. Likewise, when non-participant people are explained the design of Milgram's experiments and asked what they think they would do in such circumstances, most predict that they would not administer the electric shocks to the protesting subject, nor do they expect other people to do so (Milgram, 1974, pp. 27–31). People tend to think that their behavior under the experimental conditions would be relatively impervious to the relevant environmental-situational influences, but the results contradict this intuition.

The lesson to be drawn from these studies is not that intraindividual variables do not matter, or that behavior is wholly determined by environmental-situational conditions. Among other things, the variance needs to be accounted for as much as the situational effects, and an internalist theorist has resources to account for priming effects in a way that is consistent with an internalist account. Still, the evidence just discussed points to a much greater role for environmental-situational factors as determinants of behavior than ordinary intuition would allow. As we reflect on these results, the internalistic view starts to lose some of its intuitive pull.

4. Step 2: the case for interactionist explanations of personality-characteristic behavior

The claim I now wish to put forward is that the expression of personality-characteristic behaviors is typically the result of a systematic interaction between features internal to the agent and features of the environment and situations she finds herself in — a claim I will refer to as *interactionism* about personality.

Neither the idea nor the label are new. In fact, interactionism has come to be the dominant view on the determinants of personality-characteristic behavior among contemporary personality psychologists (Fleeson, 2004; Funder, 2006; Mischel, 2004; Roberts & Pomerantz, 2004; Swann & Seyle, 2005; Wagerman & Funder, 2009). As one prominent figure in the field put it, an interactionist view has come to be regarded as something of a truism (Funder, 2006, p. 22).

That does not mean, however, that there is anything really obvious about it. In fact, the current interactionist consensus came about as the result of one of the most heated theoretical disputes among XXth-century psychologists: the *person-situation debate*. A brief look into the history of this controversy will help us bring into clearer focus both the shape and the importance of the interactionist claim.

Personality and social psychologists engaged in a long argument concerning the extent to which individual and environmental-situational factors contribute to the explanation of behavioral outcomes. As a rule, researchers in the field of Personality Psychology argued for the primacy of intraindividual factors while social psychologists typically argued for the primacy of (pure) situationist explanations. The crux of the debate concerned the extent to which people's behavior exhibits the requisite levels of regularity. The basic assumption behind this was that intrinsic psychological properties remain relatively constant across time, while environmental and situational conditions are much more variable. If behavioral outcomes were internally-driven, personality traits would need to be quite robust, meaning that we should find personality-characteristic behavior that shows appropriate levels of consistency across a wide spectrum of trait-relevant situations, including situations not optimally conducive to the expression of that particular trait (Doris, 2002, p. 18; Merritt et al., 2010, p. 356). Thus, in principle, the degree of behavioral regularity uncovered by empirical studies could be interpreted as a presumptive measure of the extent to which behavioral outcomes were

driven by constant internal factors or by variable environmental and situational conditions⁵.

The evidence, however, was often not easily interpreted. Starting with Hartshorne & May's (1928) classic study of conscientiousness in schoolchildren, researchers met time and again with the apparently perplexing result that, at the single-observation level, behaviors in one kind of situation (e.g., deceptive behavior in the classroom) yielded only very modest correlations with behavior in other kinds of situations (e.g., deceptive behavior at home). Empirical studies typically found that the correlations between behaviors across different types of situations are slightly above chance, but way far from the levels of consistency that would be expected if personality-characteristic behavior were internally driven by robust traits. In time, most parties in the debate came to agree that as a rule people display very low levels of cross-situational consistency. Observed past behavior in one type of situation is typically a poor basis for predicting behavior in a different type of situation (Doris, 2002; Fleeson, 2004; Kenrick & Funder, 1988; Mischel & Peake, 1982; Ross & Nisbett, 1991).

That still left room for disagreement concerning whether cross-situational consistency was the adequate place to look for a measure of the contribution of individual and situational factors. As empirical studies also showed, people typically exhibit significant degrees of temporal stability, i.e., people do tend to behave similarly over iterated trials of highly similar situations (Asendorpf, 2009; Doris, 2002; Fleeson, 2004; Funder, 2006; Mischel, 2004; Mischel & Peake, 1982).

A third critical finding was that distinctive behavioral profiles of individual characteristics are identifiable at the aggregate level. That is, if behavior is registered across a variety of situations during an extended period of time, individual characteristics will show up in the way different people's mean averages across situations during that time differ from each other (Epstein, 1979; Fleeson, 2004). This reflects the intuitive observation that some people are *on average* more aggressive than others, or more sociable, or more introverted.

So, what does this all mean? The finding that people typically exhibit low levels of cross-situational consistency at the single-observation level speaks to the importance of environmental-situational factors in influencing any particular instance of behavior, and thus provides strong evidence against a purely internalistic account of personality. In turn, the finding that people do tend to behave in similar ways over iterated trials of highly similar circumstances is itself amenable to both the 'person' and the 'situation' sides of the debate. A pure internalist theorist may argue that constant internal factors are driving the stability in observed behaviors, while a situationist theorist may point to highly similar environmental-situational conditions as providing the best explanation of temporal stability. Finally, the finding that people show distinctive profiles of individual differences when aggregate mean levels of behavior over extended periods of time are considered seems to provide evidence against a pure situationist account, and in favor of a role for individual factors in driving personality-characteristic behavior across different situations, even if these are not strong enough to yield high levels of cross-situational consistency at the single observation level.

In the end, most parties in the debate came to acknowledge that the claims of both the 'person' and the 'situation' sides were untenable in their extreme, pure versions and that the available evidence pointed to a compromise middle ground. Thus the current interactionist consensus came about⁶. As the evidence shows, both intraindividual and environmental-situational factors play a measurable role in driving behavioral outcomes, and neither of them can explain behavior by itself. Or, to put it differently, the evidence suggests that both intra-individual and environmental-situational factors are ineliminable contributors to any plausible explanation of personality-characteristic behaviors.

⁵ An important note to make is that no one expected perfect behavioral regularity. In fact, situationally insensitive behavioral tendencies that result in perfectly invariant behavioral patterns may be interpreted as a significant indication of psychological abnormality or even pathology (Kenrick & Funder, 1988, p. 24). As noted before, the relevant regularity here always comes down to a matter of degree.

⁶ In that regard, many pointed out the analogy with the equally (in)famous nature/nurture debate (e.g., Funder, 2006, p. 26; Mischel, 2004, p. 4).

5. Step 3: people often engage in situation selection and modification as a way of managing their own behavioral tendencies

Say that Maia's finals are approaching, and she has fallen behind in her reading schedule. As she makes plans for the next few days, she realizes that if she ends up watching the newly available season of her favorite series, she won't be able to get the work done in time. So she needs to exercise self-control. Ordinary wisdom would have it that she has a much better chance of successfully resisting the temptation to watch the series if she spends the day in the silent area at the university library than if she chooses to study at home in her own room. There seems to be something about the setting itself—the walls covered with bookshelves, the fellow students working on their materials, the fact that making noise is not allowed—that intuitively makes some kind of contribution to her goal of not turning the series on.

That intuition is in fact well-supported by empirical evidence. Self-control may be treated as a personality trait, as people regularly display measurably different levels of self-control across different kinds of situations. People high in 'trait self-control'—as measured by the self-control questionnaire (Tangney *et al.*, 2004)—seem to achieve this feat not by displaying a better-than-average capacity to effortfully refrain in the face of temptation, but by cleverly selecting and manipulating environmental conditions in a way that leads to fewer exposures to temptation-related cues in the first place (Ent *et al.*, 2015; Hofmann *et al.*, 2012; Imhoff *et al.*, 2014)⁷. A similar conclusion is borne by studies on people's strategies to deal with procrastination. It seems that people who are more successful at delivering work on time will sometimes choose to self-impose penalty-involving deadlines as a way of making sure that they will get their work done (Ariely & Wertenbroch, 2002). That is, they actively manipulate environmental-situational conditions as a way of managing their own behavioral tendencies.

This is, I suggest, a common phenomenon that extends well beyond the case of trait self-control. In fact, such a conclusion is suggested by a little reflection on the interactionist view itself. As I argued before, behavioral outcomes are the result of a systematic interaction between people's intraindividual characteristics and environmental-situational conditions. As it happens, people often have some degree of a capacity to choose the kinds of environments and situations they find themselves in, and thus have to some extent an indirect capacity to manage the expression of their own personality-characteristic behaviors via the selection, manipulation, and modification of environmental-situational conditions.

We often overlook the role played by this active selection and manipulation of environmental-situational factors in the explanation of people's behavior. Think, for instance, of the so-called 'consistency paradox' (Mischel & Peake, 1982). Although, as discussed above, time and again studies have shown that people typically display relatively low levels of cross-situational consistency in their behavior, that is hardly the impression we get in our ordinary dealings. To a casual observer, people do not seem to display erratic, disordered patterns of behavior but to behave to a considerable extent in regular, recognizable, predictable ways.

Part of the solution to this 'paradox' likely involves some sort of error theory on the casual observation that people behave in highly regular ways across time and situations⁸. But it is also plausible that people's low cross-situational consistency is obscured to us by the fact that people typically face

⁷ It might be open to question whether these 'indirect' self-control strategies actually count as exercises of self-control in the usual philosophical sense of the term. See Levy (2017) for discussion. Note, however, that what is at issue here is the finding that people high in 'trait self-control' often regulate their behavior by selection and manipulation of environmental-situational conditions, and that point stands even if 'trait self-control' should better go under another name, as Levy and other philosophers seem to think. I defend a broad, inclusive view of self-control in (Burdman, 2023).

⁸ For instance, Mischel and Peake (1982) argue that the mistaken impression of cross-situational consistency arises from the actual observation of temporal stability over iterated trials of highly similar situations that are seen as prototypical for the trait in question.

patterns of highly similar situations in their everyday lives. Moreover, it does not just happen to people that they regularly find themselves in such similar situations. As a rule, people actively seek to place themselves in situations congruent to their preferences and tendencies, and they purposively seek to avoid environments and situations incongruent with them. As people recurrently engage in similar environments and situations, their behavior appears to display a higher degree of regularity than would be apparent if we considered a wider cross-situational sample. Indeed, there is ample experimental and ecological evidence that suggests that differences in individual behavioral profiles result in differential choices leading to profile-congruent situations, and thus foster the impression of greater overall behavioral consistency (for a review of the evidence, see Ickes, Snyder, & Garcia (1997)).

Imagine you are making up your mind about what to do tonight, as you might either go to the movies, go to a rock concert, or just stay at home. That decision will be driven, in part, by your preferences and your behavioral tendencies, including an assessment of the places where you tend to feel more comfortable and the things you expect to enjoy. If interactionism is right, however, the environments and situations you end up placing yourself in will also play a significant part in explaining your actual behavioral outcomes. So, as long as the decision you end up taking has an impact on the environmental-situational conditions you end up finding yourself in tonight, this amounts to actively manipulating (part of) the conditions conducive to the expression of certain trait-relevant behaviors during that time.

The effect of such decisions is greater when we consider a larger timescale. We all make at different points in our lives important decisions concerning work, career and social relations that have far-reaching influences on the kinds of settings that structure our daily living. The fact that Rocío is a librarian and Michel is a photographer is likely explained, among other things, by choices they made in the past based on their own preferences and behavioral tendencies. However, from an interactionist perspective we might add that those choices have a significant role in determining the sorts of environments and situations they routinely find themselves in, and these work jointly with their intra-individual psychological features to drive actual behavioral outcomes, which we then see as characteristic of their personalities. Upon reflection, it is not at all implausible that their decisions concerning career choices were at least partly inspired by a thought about how these would help them shape themselves to be the sort of people they wanted to be.

Another prominent way in which people place themselves in certain environments and situations is via their choices concerning romantic partners and friends. As a rule, the social environment provided by these relations remains relatively stable across significant stretches of time. And the choices people make concerning partners of social interaction will often result in them gravitating towards a similar pattern of environments and situations. Again, from an interactionist perspective, this amounts to a way in which people actively influence the expression of their own personality-characteristic behaviors. If one is lucky enough, personal relationships may provide a fruitful environment for the development of the sorts of behaviors one wishes to foster. On the other hand, it may happen to someone to be involved in an unhealthy, negative relationship with a partner or a friend and feel that in the context of that relationship her more negative features tend to surface. 'He gets the worst out of me', someone in such a situation might say. As everyone knows, to distance oneself from such relationships may be an effective way of avoiding the behaviors one does not wish to promote. The same insight applies to people attempting to overcome an addiction, for whom strategies of situational selection and manipulation play a crucial role (Burdman, 2023; Snoek *et al.*, 2016).

A further important point is that there is also evidence that chronic exposure to similar situations may have a significant effect over people's behavioral tendencies (Ickes *et al.*, 1997; Kenrick & Funder, 1988). So it is not far-fetched to assume that people may sometimes take advantage of an intuitive understanding of these dynamics to effect desired changes in themselves. Indeed, it is possible for people to deliberately choose to place themselves in environments and situations that they see as incongruent with their preferences and tendencies as a way of effecting changes in their own personality.

For instance, someone who is introverted may choose to take up acting classes, thus placing herself in situations that are incongruent with her current preferences and tendencies, but that she regards as conducive to the development of a different set of personality-characteristic behaviors much like phobics sometimes deliberately choose to place themselves in preference-incongruent situations in order to effect desired changes in their current dispositions (Snyder & Ickes, 1985).

6. Two objections

Before we conclude, let us briefly consider a couple of important objections that may be raised by a defender of an internalist account of the causal basis of personality-characteristic behaviors.

6.1. *Dispositional versus interactionist explanations*

A defender of a purely internalistic approach might concede that something close to the interactionist view is correct and accept that all personality-characteristic behaviors are always the result of an interplay between factors internal to the agent and environmental-situational conditions. But still—the objection goes—, isn't that open to a redescription in terms of internally based psychological dispositions and mere external eliciting factors? The point at issue concerns exactly how we should picture the contribution of external factors to ensuing personality-characteristic behaviors. On the internalistic picture proposed by the objector, internally based psychological properties of the agent are the only proper explanatory factors, while environmental-situational factors merely provide the elicitation conditions for the relevant psychological dispositions. On the interactionist picture, on the other hand, the causal interplay between internal and external factors is rich enough to merit the description of a systematic interaction.

An internalist redescription gains traction from the fact that commonsense tends to think in internalistic terms, and from the fact that intraindividual features are no doubt an important part of the explanation of personality-characteristic behaviors. And yet, though the evidence discussed in the foregoing sections does not actually falsify the internalistic approach, it does render it highly implausible.

Consider first that, for the strategy envisioned by the objector to have a chance at all, a myriad of dispositions with very fine-grained elicitation conditions would need to be attributed to the agent. The resulting analysis would then look nothing like the commonsense assumption that what leads someone to behave in a particular manner in a particular situation is just that "she is shy" or "she is extroverted", but something closer to "she tends to respond shyly when approached in this particular manner by this particular kind of relational figure in such and such particular kind of environment and situational context". So, while there is still logical room for an internalistic approach, the shape this would need to have to be compatible with the evidence already departs quite a bit from the sort of view that can credibly claim to be supported by ordinary intuition. As the specification of the internal dispositions becomes increasingly complex and fine-grained, and threatens to become an endless task, at some point an anti-individualistic explanation in terms of the systematic interaction between features of the individual and environment-situational conditions becomes the more plausible description of the relevant causal process.

A second problem for the internalistic strategy is that it lacks the resources to explain reciprocal, *dynamic* interactions between intraindividual and environmental-situational variables. Dynamic interactions are at play given the way that people may actively engage in environmental-situational selection and manipulation as a means of managing their own behavioral tendencies. As discussed before, it may happen in some cases that people engage in these situational strategies as a way of effecting desired changes in themselves. So someone may choose to place herself in certain situations on account of her current inclinations and preferences, and chronic exposure to such situations may then have an effect on resulting inclinations and preferences, leading then to different actions of environmental-situational

selection and manipulation. An interactionist framework seems much better poised to account for these complex dynamics.

6.2. Causal versus constitutive external contributions

A second objection that might be raised by a defender of an internalist about personality concerns the role played by the relevant external factors. A defender of an internalistic view could acknowledge that all sorts of environmental-situational influences may modulate an agent's behavior at particular times, but she would argue that these amount only to *causal* influences, whereas a successful externalistic claim needs to prove some sort of *constitutive* involvement of the relevant external factors.

Much of this issue revolves around what 'causal' and 'constitutive' are taken to mean, and a proper treatment of the metaphysics of causality and constitutiveness would lead us far astray. Still, there are considerations that speak against the 'merely causal' defense of the internalist position.

First—and obviously enough—environmental-situational factors will *always* be part of the explanation of any instance of personality-characteristic behavior. So, while environmental-situational conditions may, in principle, be highly variable, no instance of personality-characteristic behavior is ever produced that is not affected by such 'merely causal' influence. In that regard, its explanatory status might be thought of as analogous to the role of the presence of ambient light in the explanation of vision. The idea that light is 'constitutively' part of the explanation of vision may seem odd from an ordinary point of view only because we tend to simply discount the presence of light—like the presence of breathable air—, as such reliably constant feature of our environments. Still, that does not mean that there is anything absurd in the idea that ambient light is a crucial and ineliminable component in an explanation of our visual capacities (Gibson, 1986; Noë, 2004).

Consider, further, that it does not just happen to people that they live under the influence of the relevant environmental-situational factors. There might be some plausibility to downplaying the presence or absence of a dime in a telephone booth as a 'merely causal' influence, but much of the evidence we discussed in previous sections concerns the role of elements that are a crucial feature of the kinds of environments and situations we ordinarily inhabit as human beings. For instance, a prominent kind of environmental-situational factor exerting influence over personality-characteristic behavioral outcomes is the social setting a person engages with. Intuitively, this has a much better claim on being a constitutive factor in shaping human psychology. The dynamics of particular personal relationships—the kind of history-based interpersonal dynamics that we establish with partners, family members or close friends—or the presence of symbols of social status—as in relations of subordination and authority—or merely the presence of passive bystanders—as in the 'bystander effect'—all point to prominent ways in which our social environments are structured that are not easily dismissed as inessential. And the same goes for the physical environments themselves that we humans inhabit, embedded as they are in a wealth of cues of cultural and social significance. It is not at all implausible to think of characteristic human behavior as fundamentally connected to such environmental-situational conditions.

The same point may be pressed by highlighting the extent to which the behavior that we consider characteristic or typical of an agent's personality profile would be modified if the environmental-situational pressures that she typically faces were to be significantly altered. This brings us back to an earlier point, namely that we tend to overestimate the stability of people's behavioral tendencies because we tend to overlook the role played by more or less constant circumstances in the shaping and production of the relevant behavioral outcomes. The research into the determinants of personality-characteristic behaviors discussed above suggests, however, that if the environments and circumstances in which a person finds herself could be altered systematically, we should expect to find very significant changes in her behavior. Once we look at things under that guise, the intuition that environmental-situational

conditions provide merely the background against which personality expresses itself starts to loosen its grip on our imagination.

Conclusion

People display recognizably characteristic behavioral patterns across time and situations, with a given degree of regularity—behavioral patterns that are measurable at the aggregate level, though they may not be discernible at the level of single observations. It is arguably the common-sense view that what drives the expression of these personality-characteristic behaviors are just intrinsic properties of agents' psychology. According to interactionism, this happens to be wrong. Of course, factors internal to the agent are part of the explanation of her behavior, but there is suggestive evidence that personality-characteristic behaviors are not just internally driven. If the foregoing argument is correct, the relevant behavioral regularities are much better explained as the result of a systematic interaction between intraindividual characteristics and environmental-situational factors. And that interaction is something people may act on, at least to a certain extent, insofar as they can exercise some degree of control over the environments and situations they find themselves in. Indeed, as we have seen, selecting and modifying environmental-situational conditions may be a way of manipulating one's own personality-characteristic behaviors, as environmental-situational conditions are among the factors that contribute to behavioral outcomes.

To be sure, there is much more to be said to make the case for an active-externalistic account of personality complete. Some of the arguments I presented here are suggestive rather than conclusive, and the discussion bracketed some relevant factors that should go into a more comprehensive treatment of personality psychology, including factors relating to personal, family and social histories. And much more work still needs to be done to dispel the force of internalistic intuitions on this subject. I take it to have shown, however, that there is a forceful case to be made for an externalistic view, and that this is a path worth pursuing both for theorists of personality and for philosophers interested in the prospects of externalistic accounts of mind.

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Submetido em 15 de abril de 2022.

Aceito em 26 de setembro de 2022.