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## Aristotelian Moral Psychology and the Situationist Challenge

**Abstract:** For some time now moral psychologists and philosophers have ganged up on Aristotelians, arguing that results from psychological studies on the role of character-based and situation-based influences on human behavior have convincingly shown that situations rather than personal characteristics determine human behavior. In the literature on moral psychology and philosophy this challenge is commonly called the “situationist challenge,” and as Prinz (2009) has previously explained, it has largely been based on results from four salient studies in social psychology, including the studies conducted by Hartshorne and May (1928), Milgram (1963), Isen and Levin (1972), and Darley and Batson (1973). The situationist challenge maintains that each of these studies seriously challenges the plausibility of virtuous personal characteristics by challenging the plausibility of personal characteristics more generally. In this article I undermine the situationist challenge against Aristotelian moral psychology by carefully considering major problems with the conclusions that situationists have drawn from the empirical data, and by further challenging the accuracy of their characterization of the Aristotelian view. In fact I show that when properly understood the Aristotelian view is not only consistent with empirical data from developmental science but can also offer important insights for integrating moral psychology with its biological roots in our natural and social life.

**Key words:** Aristotle; character; development; habits; moral psychology; perceptual learning; personality; situationist challenge; virtue ethics

### Introduction

For some time now moral psychologists and philosophers have ganged up on Aristotelians, arguing that results from psychological studies on the role of character-based and situation-based influences on human behavior have convincingly shown that situations rather than personal characteristics determine human behavior (cf. Doris 1998; Harman 1999; Harman 2000)<sup>1</sup>. In *The Nonexistence of Character Traits*, for example, Harman (2000) asserts that, “We need to convince people to look at situational factors and to stop trying to explain things in terms of character traits. We need to abandon all talk of virtue and character” (p. 224, my emphasis). In the literature on moral psychology and philosophy this challenge is commonly called the “situationist challenge,” and as Prinz (2009) has previously explained, it has largely been based on results from four salient studies in social psychology, including the studies conducted by Hartshorne and May (1928), Milgram (1963), Isen and Levin (1972), and Darley and Batson (1973). The situationist challenge maintains that each of these studies seriously challenges the plausibility of virtuous

personal characteristics by challenging the plausibility of personal characteristics more generally. In this article I undermine the situationist challenge against Aristotelian moral psychology by carefully considering major problems with the conclusions that situationists have drawn from the empirical data, and by further challenging the accuracy of their characterization of the Aristotelian view. In fact I show that when properly understood the Aristotelian view is not only consistent with empirical data from developmental science but can also offer important insights for integrating moral psychology with its biological roots in our natural and social life.

### Characteristic and Situational Influences on Human Behavior

Situationists often claim that Aristotelians are committed to (at least) the following three theses regarding personal characteristics: (A1) *the stability of character thesis*, which maintains that behavioral variation is due to different personal characteristics rather than different situations (cf. Doris 1998, p. 515; Harman 1999, p. 316-317,

<sup>1</sup> In this article I follow in line with current scholarship in using the expressions characteristics and character traits interchangeably.

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319, 329; Athanassoulis 2000, p. 215; Prinz 2009, p. 119), (A2) the *robustness of character thesis*, which maintains that personal characteristics resist contrary situational pressures (cf. Doris 1998, p. 506; Harman 1999, p. 318; Harman 2000, p. 224; Prinz 2009, p. 119), and (A3) the *evaluative consistency or integrity of character thesis*, which maintains that the possession of any virtuous personal characteristic is highly correlated with the possession of other virtuous characteristics (cf. Doris 1998, p. 506; Prinz 2009, p. 119). Further, situationists maintain that their attribution of theses (A1)-(A3) to Aristotelians is firmly supported by textual evidence. For instance, in support of (A1) Doris (1998) cites *Nicomachean Ethics* (1105b1) and suggests that here Aristotle claims that for an action to count as virtuous “it must be determined by the appropriately developed character of the agent” (Doris 1998, p. 515). In support of (A2) Doris (1998) cites *Nicomachean Ethics* (1105b1) and *Categories* (8b25-9a9) and suggests that here Aristotle claims that good character is “firm and unchangeable” and that the virtues are “permanent and hard to change” (p. 506; Merritt 2009, p. 23). In support of (A3) Doris (1998) cites *Nicomachean Ethics* (1144b30-1145a2) and suggests that here Aristotle claims that “possession of one particular virtue entails possession of all the virtues” (p. 506 and fn. 11 on p. 521).

To contrast their own position with that of Aristotelians, situationists have asserted their commitment to (at least) the following alternative theses regarding personal characteristics: (S1) *the instability of character thesis*, which maintains that behavioral variation is due to different situations rather than different personal characteristics (Doris 1998, p. 507; Harman 2000, p. 224), (S2) *the impotence of character thesis*, which maintains that personal characteristics are not resistant to contrary situational pressures (Doris 1998, p. 507-508), and (S3) *the evaluative inconsistency or fragmentation of character thesis*, which maintains that the possession of any virtuous personal characteristic is not highly correlated with the possession of other virtuous personal characteristics (Doris 1998, p. 509). For instance, in explicating (S1) Doris (1998) asserts that “Behavioral variation across a population owes more to situational differences than dispositional differences among persons” and that “we are safest predicting, for a particular situation, that a person will behave pretty much as most others would” (p. 507). In explicating (S2) Doris (1998) asserts that “behavior may vary quite radically when compared with that expected on the postulation of a given trait” (p. 508) since “Whatever behavioral reliability we do observe may be readily short-circuited by situational variation” (p. 507). Finally, in explicating (S3) Doris (1998) asserts that people possess “evaluatively fragmented trait-associations rather than evaluatively integrated ones” (p. 509).

Situationists challenge Aristotelian moral psychology by arguing that the empirical evidence from recent psychological studies purportedly support theses (S1)-(S3) but not theses (A1)-(A3). “To have different character traits,” Harman (1999) argued in “Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology,” subjects “must

be disposed to act differently in the same circumstances” (p. 317). Yet situationists argue that the empirical evidence from the studies conducted by Hartshorne and May (1928), Milgram (1963), Isen and Levin (1972), and Darley and Batson (1973) suggest that humans fail to demonstrate this requisite cross-situational consistency and behavioral reliability. Harman (1999) sums up the situationist challenge for Aristotelians quite succinctly: “Empirical studies designed to test whether people behave differently in ways that might reflect their having different character traits have failed to find relevant differences [...] *we must conclude that there is no empirical basis for the existence of character traits*” (p. 316, my emphasis). Roughly, the situationist strategy is to use empirical results from the four aforementioned studies to undermine the plausibility of personal characteristics as such, and in so doing, also undermining the plausibility of personal characteristics that are virtuous, since virtuous personal characteristics constitute only a subset of all personal characteristics. So in order to determine how forceful the situationist challenge against Aristotelian moral psychology really is, it is crucial to devote some care to briefly reviewing and understanding the details and results of the four salient studies that have been used to support the situationist challenge.

#### **Hartshorne and May (1928): Studies in the Nature of Character**

First consider the empirical study conducted by Hartshorne and May (1928), where experimenters used 33 different behavioral tests on subjects ( $n = 10,865$ ) to assess their level of altruism, self-control, and honesty across different situational contexts (including the classroom, at home, at play, and during athletics). Within each of these contexts, ratings of subjects with respect to their reputation among other classmates and teachers were taken, and then the score for each subject on these tests were inter-correlated to determine whether their ratings could be generalized across all situations (if these correlations were found to be high) or were instead specific to certain situations (if these correlations were found to be low or non-existent). Subjects in this study came from 23 communities across the United States and consisted of children from 8 to 16 years of age (mostly from 5th to 8th grade). Results from this study conducted by Hartshorne and May (1928) demonstrated that the experimenters found relatively low inter-correlations with an average of approximately +0.20 between any one behavioral test and any another behavioral test used to measure for altruism, honesty, and self-control (e.g., +0.23 for altruism). Situationists then argued that these results demonstrably undermine the viability of the Aristotelian conception of virtuous personal characteristics. For instance, Prinz (2009) argues in “The Normativity Challenge” that this challenges Aristotelians on the grounds that it “shows that individuals behave in different ways across contexts in which they should behave similarly if they were acting under the influence of global character traits” and that “a person who doesn’t steal may nevertheless cheat, which undermines the application of broad labels such as “honest” or “dishonest”” (p. 119-120).

### Reconsidering Hartshorne and May (1928)

Situationists argued that the results from the Hartshorne and May (1928) study demonstrated that subjects behave differently across situations in which they ought to behave similarly if they in fact possessed the relevant personal characteristics. Since situationists interpreted the result that relatively low inter-correlations were found with an average of approximately +0.20 between any two measures for altruism, honesty, and self-control (e.g., +0.23 for altruism) as showing that behavioral variation is due to different situations rather than different personal characteristics, they argued that the results from this study undermine the Aristotelian thesis (A1) and instead support the situationist thesis (S1). Since situationists also interpreted the results from this study as showing that the possession of virtuous personal characteristics (e.g., honesty) are not highly correlated with the possession of other virtuous personal characteristics (e.g., self-control) they argued that the results from this study also undermine the Aristotelian thesis (A3) and instead support the situationist thesis (S3).

The first problem with the situationist analysis of the Hartshorne and May (1928) study concerns the fact that it neglects the amount of behavioral consistency that this study does in fact find. For as a matter of fact this study did find some significant correlation between any two measures for altruism, honesty, and self-control, and the fact that there was an approximately +0.20 average correlation between any two measures for altruism, honesty, and self-control is a replicable finding suggestive of at least some significant consistency in behavior (cf. Rushton, Chrisjohn, & Fekken 1981). This is not a fact that situationists are free to selectively ignore, so while not denying the situationist point that situational contexts are important to consider in understanding human behavior, they have gone too far in interpreting this as evidence that behavioral consistency does not exist at all (cf. Harman 1999, p. 316). Furthermore, it was found that within these different situations some of the children were more honest, more helpful, and more likely to resist temptation than others (cf. Sigelman & Rider 2009, p. 390) which is a finding that cannot be explained by situational factors alone since these behavioral differences were found within the same situations.

The second problem with the situationist analysis of the Hartshorne and May (1928) study concerns the fact that it focuses primarily on correlations between single measures instead of combinations of exemplars and in so doing has neglected to correct for error variance. In the psychological literature it has previously been discussed that sampling a number of exemplars is often more reliable than using single measures since a fair amount of randomness will usually be present in any single measure (cf. Spearman 1910; Eysenck 1939; Rushton, Chrisjohn, & Fekken 1981) and that combining and summing over a number of exemplars facilitates the averaging out of randomness (i.e., error variance) and provides for better predictability of behavior (cf. Rushton, Chrisjohn, & Fekken 1981). In the Hartshorne and May (1928) study in particular,

although relatively low correlations of approximately +0.20 were found between single measures of altruism, honesty, and self-control (e.g., +0.23 for altruism) much higher correlations of approximately +0.50 to +0.60 were found when the five measures were combined into batteries (e.g., +0.61 for altruism). As Hartshorne, May, and Maller (1929) mentioned in the second volume of *Studies in the Nature of Character*, “The correlation between the total service score and the total reputation score is 0.61 [...] Although this seems low, it should be borne in mind that the correlations between test scores and ratings for intelligence seldom run higher than 0.50” (p. 107). Perceptions of subjects by both teachers and peers were also found to highly agree (e.g.,  $r = 0.81$  for altruism; Hartshorne, May, & Maller 1929, p. 91), which is suggestive of significant behavioral consistency from subjects. As a matter of fact, more recent analyses of the data along with further studies have suggested that children behave more consistently than Hartshorne and May (1928) originally concluded (cf. Burton 1963; Hoffman 2000; Kochanska & Aksan 2006).

The third problem with the situationist analysis of the Hartshorne and May (1928) study concerns the fact that it misleadingly over-generalizes the results from a study whose population group consisted of *children* to enforce subsequent conclusions concerning *all human beings*. It is important to remain cognizant of the fact that children constitute only a subset of all human beings, and that it is not plausible that a group consisting only of children is what we (or Aristotle) would suspect as being the most relevantly consistent or stable in behavior anyways. Indeed, recent empirical studies have shown that behavior is not as closely interrelated in childhood as it is in adolescence or adulthood (Blasi 1980; Sigelman & Rider 2009, p. 390) and that it is not as children but as we grow *older* that we get “set in our ways” (Westerhoff 2008, p. 44). Sherman, Rudie, Pfeifer, Masten, McNealy, and Dapretto (2014) for example conducted a longitudinal fMRI study on participants at 10 and 13 years of age ( $n = 45$ ) and found that there was significant within-network maturation (i.e., stronger within-network connectivity) and between-network segregation (i.e., weaker correlation between regions belonging to different networks) in the functional architecture of the brain from 10 to 13 years of age, and that there were significant positive correlations between measures of IQ and stronger within-network (dlPFC-pPC) connectivity and between-network (dlPFC-PCC) segregation (p. 148-157). In a time estimation study conducted by Kiefer, Wallot, Gresham, Kloos, Riley, Shockley, and van Orden (2014) conducted on children from 4 to 12 years of age ( $n = 90$ ) and adults 19 years of age ( $n = 10$ ) it was found that cognitive development progressed from a very loose and poorly integrated coordination of factors toward a pattern that expressed more integration and that allowed for more stable coordination (p. 393-399). In another study by Robins, Fraley, Roberts, and Trzesniewski (2001) that examined personality continuity and change in a sample of young men and women throughout their 4 years of college ( $n = 270$ ) they reported finding “small- to medium-sized



normative (i.e., mean-level) changes, large rank-order stability correlations, high levels of stability in personality structure, and moderate levels of ipsative (i.e. profile) stability,” and that “Overall, the findings are consistent with the perspective that personality traits exhibit considerable continuity overtime, yet can change in systematic ways” (p. 617-640). In further work from the developmental science literature, Grammer, Carrasco, Gehring, and Morrison (2014) conducted a Go/No-Go study on participants from 3 to 7 years of age ( $n = 96$ ) and found that older children showed increased response inhibition as evidenced by faster and more accurate responses than younger children (p. 93-103). In a structural MRI study conducted by Churchwell and Yurgelun-Todd (2013) on participants from 10 to 20 years of age ( $n = 59$ ) it was found that insula thickness was positively associated with impulsivity and that both impulsivity and anterior insula thickness decreased with age (p. 80-85). In another structural MRI study conducted by Kharitonova, Martin, Gabrieli, and Sheridan (2013) on children from 5 to 10 years of age ( $n = 32$ ) it was found that there were significant correlations between reductions in cortical thickness and age-related improvements in performance on both working memory and cognitive control tasks (e.g., they found that cortical thinning in the rIFG significantly mediated the link between age and faster performance on a Simon task). What Kharitonova, Martin, Gabrieli and Sheridan (2013) have suggested is that age-related cortical gray matter thinning, which presumably results from selective pruning of inefficient synaptic connections and increases in myelination, may support age-related improvements in executive functions (p. 61-69). In an fMRI study conducted by Padmanabhan, Geier, Ordaz, Teslovich, and Luna (2011) on participants from 8 to 25 years of age ( $n = 30$ ) it was found that adults showed more consistent inhibitory error rates (10-20%) across neutral and rewarding trials than children, suggesting that the cognitive control of adults is more stable and less prone to external influences than that of children (p. 517-527). Finally, in an MEG and MRI study conducted by Vara, Pang, Vidal, Anagnostou, and Taylor (2014) on adolescents from 13 to 17 years of age ( $n = 15$ ) and adults from 20 to 35 years of age ( $n = 15$ ) it was found that there was delayed recruitment of canonical inhibitory control areas with supplementary and prolonged involvement of temporal areas in adolescents compared to adults that indicates an immature inhibitory network even in adolescence (p. 129-138).

Certainly Aristotle would not have been surprised by results such as these. For Aristotle was quite insistent in *Nicomachean Ethics* that children especially were in need of proper rearing since “longing for pleasure is present in them especially [...] and bombards from all sides someone who lacks sense” (NE 1119b5-15; NE 1142a10-15). It is partly because children are especially susceptible to being bombarded with varying pleasures “from all sides” that they especially benefit from being habituated and educated correctly (NE 1104b5-10). As Aristotle writes, “It makes no small difference, then, whether one is habituated in this or that way straight from childhood but a very great difference – or rather the whole difference” (NE 1103b20-

25). So it is clear from this that Aristotle did not support claims to the effect that children come preprogrammed with the virtues already (NE 1103a15-20) so he would not readily concede that results from studies on the personal characteristics of children can carry over straightforwardly to subsequent conclusions about the personal characteristics of adults or all human beings. Given that recent empirical studies have shown that childrearing practices influence the prosocial initiations of children towards victims of distress (Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, & King 1979; Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow 1990), the results from the Hartshorne and May (1928) study could just as readily be understood as supporting the Aristotelian point that children especially are to benefit from directed upbringing and that personal characteristics require continual cultivation from childhood throughout adulthood (NE 1179b30-1180a5). So Aristotle would certainly not expect results from studies on children to be straightforwardly carried over to conclusions concerning all human beings, although this is precisely what situationists have done.

So under further consideration of these problems with the situationist analysis of the Hartshorne and May (1928) study it can be concluded that situationists are not in fact warranted in claiming that these results undermine the Aristotelian theses (A1) and (A3) and instead support the situationist theses (S1) and (S3).

### **Darley and Batson (1973): From Jerusalem to Jericho**

Next consider the empirical study conducted by Darley and Batson (1973) where experimenters began experimental procedures with subjects in one building and then instructed the subjects to report to another building to give a talk on some topic specified by the experimenter (the topic depended on whether the subject was in the talk-relevant or helping-relevant condition; see below). On the commute between buildings each subject would walk down a path that passed a man slumped over in an alleyway with his head down, eyes closed, coughing and groaning. The dependent variable in this study was whether and how the subject helped the slumped over man in the alleyway. There were two independent variables, the first of which was whether the subjects were in the task-relevant or helping-relevant condition. Subjects in the task-relevant condition were instructed to give a talk on the jobs in which seminary students would be most effective and subjects in the helping-relevant condition were instructed to give a talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan. The second independent variable was whether the subjects were in the low-hurry, intermediate-hurry, or high-hurry condition. Subjects in the low-hurry condition were told, “It’ll be a few minutes before they’re ready for you, but you might as well head on over. If you have to wait over there, it shouldn’t be long.” Subjects in the intermediate-hurry condition were told, “The assistant is ready for you, so please go right over.” Subjects in the high-hurry condition were told, “Oh, you’re late. They were expecting you a few minutes ago. We’d better get moving. The assistant should be waiting for you

so you'd better hurry. It shouldn't take but just a minute" (Darley & Batson 1973, p. 103-104). Subjects consisted of 47 students at Princeton Theological Seminary. The results from this study showed that 16 of the 40 subjects (40%) offered some form of direct or indirect aid to the victim whereas 24 of the 40 subjects (60%) did not<sup>2</sup>. Also, 63% of students in the low hurry condition offered aid, 45% of students in the intermediate hurry condition offered aid, and 10% of students in the high hurry condition offered aid. Situationists argue that these results offer damaging empirical evidence against the viability of the Aristotelian conception of virtuous personal characteristics. For example, Doris (1998) claims that this study challenges Aristotelians on the grounds that "time pressures swamped subjects' dispositions to help someone they perceived to be in need of assistance" and that the "variability of behavior with situational manipulation suggests that dispositions to moral behavior are not robust in the requisite sense" (p. 510). In agreement with Doris (1998) on this point, Harman (1999) further charges Aristotelians with committing "the fundamental attribution error of overlooking the situational factors, in this case overlooking how much of a hurry the various agents might be in" (p. 324).

### Reconsidering Darley and Batson (1973)

Situationists argued that the results from the Darley and Batson (1973) study show that subjects behave differently in situations of pressure than they ought to behave if they in fact possessed the relevant personal characteristics. Since situationists interpreted the result that 63% of students in the low hurry condition, 45% of students in the intermediate hurry condition, and 10% of students in the high hurry condition offered aid as showing that personal characteristics are not resistant to contrary situational (temporal) pressures, they argued that these results undermine the Aristotelian thesis (A2) and instead support the situationist thesis (S2). Since situationists also interpreted these results as showing that behavioral variation is due to different situations (i.e., whether the subjects were in a low hurry, intermediate hurry, or high hurry condition) rather than different personal characteristics, they also argued that these results undermine the Aristotelian thesis (A1) and instead support the situationist thesis (S1).

The first problem with the situationist analysis of the Darley and Batson (1973) study concerns the fact that it neglects the amount of behavioral robustness that this study does in fact find. For as a matter of fact this study did find some significant resistance to situational (temporal) pressures, which may be taken to represent at least some significant robustness in behavior. More specifically, it was found that 16 of the 40 subjects (40%) offered some form of direct or indirect aid to the victim. In the low hurry condition 63% of students still offered aid when 37% of them did not, in the intermediate hurry condition 45% of

students still offered aid when 55% of them did not, and in the high hurry condition 10% of students still offered aid when 90% of them did not. It is not a fact that situationists are free to selectively ignore that within each situation there are evident differences in behavior, which means that situational considerations alone are insufficient for explaining behavior. "To have different character traits," Harman (1999) argues, subjects "must be disposed to act differently in the same circumstances" (p. 317) and it is clear from this study that for each condition there are in fact evident behavioral differences within the same situations. So in holding that "we are safest predicting, for a particular situation, that a person will behave pretty much as most others would" (Doris 1998, p. 507), the situationist fails to provide an account nuanced enough to explain behavioral differences within the same situations, which is what in fact the empirical results demonstrate.

The second problem with the situationist analysis of this study concerns the fact that it misleadingly overgeneralizes the results from a study whose population group consisted of *students* to enforce subsequent conclusions concerning *all human beings*. It is important to remain cognizant of the fact that students constitute only a subset of all human beings, and that it is not plausible that a student group is what one would suspect to be the most relevantly consistent or stable in behavior anyways. Instead one would suspect the most relevantly consistent and stable behavior from *instructors* or *leaders*. Those that are students are usually in the process of engaging in novel situations that they are not already expert in so that they can learn and cultivate improvement, awareness, and facility, and they should be granted some forgiveness for their lack of grace and the mistakes that they will invariably make<sup>3</sup>. It may be that this kind of situation was a novel one for the students and that only after going through it and being able to reflect over it afterwards could the students subsequently acquire a more refined readiness to act appropriately. Interestingly enough, Wills and colleagues (2007) reported that the subjects in their empirical study learned more rapidly about cues for which they initially made *incorrect* rather than correct predictions, and that this is partly due to the fact that error-related events attract more attention from subjects (p. 847-852). So perhaps making and learning from errors in difficult situations like these is what is required to cultivate experienced seminarians and may be what makes some seminary instructors as good as they are. It is those with more developed experience, such as instructors or leaders, that are expected to have already learned and earned their stripes, and that are presumably best able to see the most correct course of action in situations like these.

The third problem with the situationist analysis of this study concerns the fact that it misleadingly overgeneralizes the results from a study whose population group consisted of *seminarians* to enforce subsequent conclusions concerning *all human beings*. For it is clear that seminarians

<sup>2</sup> Note that 7 of the 47 subjects had their data excluded from the final analyses due to contamination of the experimental procedures or their suspicion of the experimental situation.

<sup>3</sup> When we see that one's actions result from "ignorance pertaining to the various particulars, both the circumstances of the action and what it concerns," Aristotle suggests, then "there is both pity and forgiveness" (NE 1111a).

constitute only a subset of all human beings, but what is not clear is that seminarians constitute a population group that is *most relevantly trained* to pick up on and aptly deal with the situation of engaging with complete strangers in alleyways, at least some of which are likely to be dangerous or sick. What is not questioned here is whether seminarians are well intentioned and well trained to provide the services that are actually within the purview of their relevant experience and specialization – such as preaching, giving lectures, and performing religious rites and ceremonies – but whether they have received the kind of training relevant to aptly deal with the kind of situation for which they have been tested. After all, seminarians are not trained or behaviorally conditioned to engage with potentially dangerous individuals or to act as first responders in medical cases. Seminarians are not paramedics despite the fact that both provide beneficial services to the public in their own ways. In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle makes a relevant point when he claims that certain characteristics only become manifest by continuously engaging in certain corresponding forms of action: “the activities that pertain in each case produce people of a corresponding sort. This is clear from those who take the appropriate care with a view to any contest or action whatever, for they are continually engaged in the relevant activity [...] the corresponding characteristics come from engaging in a given activity” (NE 1114a5-10, 1141b-20). Another passage from *Nicomachean Ethics* is particularly noteworthy in light of this point regarding relevant experience:

*experience of particular things seems to be courage as well [...] Yet different people are experienced in different things, and in matters of war, it is the professional soldiers who are such. For there seem to be many false alarms in war, which professional soldiers especially see through. Hence they appear courageous, because the others do not know what these false alarms are. Then too, professional soldiers are especially able to make an attack and not suffer one, as a result of their experience, since they are able to use their weapons and possess the sorts of things that are most excellent for both making an attack and not suffering one oneself. They, then, are like armed men fighting unarmed ones or trained athletes contesting with private amateurs. (NE 1116b5-10)*

Perhaps when it comes to assisting total strangers in alleyways paramedics are more like “trained athletes” whereas seminarians are more like “private amateurs,” considering the kinds of experience actually acquired and possessed by each. For paramedics or pararescuemen, who have paid the price for their kind of excellence through rigorously accumulated and cultivated experience, responding to others in physical need or dangerous situations has become part of their second nature (cf. Giunta 2012). Recall for example how Wesley Autrey saw a stranger suffer from a seizure and fall onto the train tracks of a New York City subway on 2 January 2011. Autrey immediately leapt out in front of the oncoming train to cover the other man’s body with his own as the train passed over them, enabling both to survive the situation unharmed (Trump 2007). Now recall that the situationist suggests that, “we are safest predicting, for a particular situation, that a person will behave pretty much as most others would” (Doris 1998, p.

507) but it seems unreasonable to suppose that most others would or could act as Autrey did on that day. In fact, many other witnesses near Autrey did not help as he did. So how can one account for the fact that Autrey, but not others, helped the unfortunate man that was almost killed on the tracks of a New York City subway? Lerner (2011) offers the following suggestion:

*spontaneous and noble action on behalf of a stranger is within the realm of human possibility. Thoughtful readings of the incident indicate just why, however, even the most altruistic among us might not act as Autrey did. A navy veteran, he had been trained to move quickly in stressful situations. Not only was Autrey able to immediately empathize with the man he beheld, but he also could draw on his military past, a way of responding that had long become for him automatic, his way of being in the world. (p. 101)*

Given considerations of this kind it remains unclear that seminarians should be expected to act with the kind of excellence as first responders or in a way that was most relevant to the situation they had faced. For although seminarians are expected to act as exemplars with respect to *some* kinds of actions they need not be expected to act as exemplars with respect to *all* kinds of actions.

The fourth problem with the situationist analysis of the Darley and Batson (1973) study concerns the fact that it simply assumes without argument how the subjects *ought* to have acted without taking into consideration their *reasons* for acting. Namely, situationists simply assume that stopping to assist strangers in alleyways is what one ought to be doing regardless of the *reasons* one has for being in a hurry and doing otherwise. For instance, Prinz (2009) argues that:

*the desire to be on time may be admirable in other contexts, but here the salient distress of another human being should trump. Sreenivasan [2002] implies that there is reason to abandon virtue in these cases, but I think he mistakes rationalization for reason. Is it really reasonable to leave a moaning stranger slouched in [a] doorway simply because you are in a hurry? What appointment could be so important? (p. 123)*

But Prinz (2009) does not provide any arguments or reasons for why assisting strangers should trump keeping promises, nor does he acknowledge the fact that here the subject is placed in a no-win situation: if one keeps their promise by making it to their appointment on time they will be persecuted for failing to assist the stranger, and if one assists the stranger they will be persecuted for failing to keep their promise by making it to the appointment on time. By placing the subject in this kind of no-win situation, they can be condemned for whichever action they choose and the situationist is handed a rather cheap victory. But choices for action involve tradeoffs and are not made in a vacuum. The question of whether to use your time to assist a stranger may seem obvious, but the question of whether to use your time to do so *instead* of making it to your sister’s wedding or catching a flight out of town to visit your dying mother is more complicated and realistic. *Of course* one should assist others when costs and alternative courses of action need not be taken into consideration, but it is not clear that one should assist others irrespective of the *reasons* one may have to *not* help. For a young seminary



student, keeping one's promise to a seminary leader or other seminary students may reasonably trump many other decisions, as one has made a *direct* commitment to their seminary obligations whereas one has made only an *indirect* commitment (if any at all) to helping others when one practically can. The seminary student may think that they are directly responsible for arriving on time to give the lecture they promised at Princeton Theological Seminary but only indirectly responsible for helping as many others as they might practically be able to. Given the fact that we must work to survive and so cannot spend every bit of our energy, money, and time in charity, there are inevitably times in which one must forgo charity for the sake of living, and for the sake of saving so that one may continue living tomorrow. The point is well put in *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle discusses liberality and suggests that the liberal person "is not careless with his own possessions [such as money and time], since he wishes, at least, to aid some people through these very possessions. And he will not give to just anyone, so that he may be able to give to whom he ought and when and where it is noble to do so" (NE 1120a25-1120b). So although it might be praiseworthy to assist strangers, if one must choose between the mutually exclusive options of assisting a stranger *or* assisting several respected colleagues *instead*, it may be *more* praiseworthy to assist the latter, given that *you cannot assist them both*. As Aristotle explicates this point:

*He will associate differently among people of worth than among people at random, just as he will associate differently also with those who are more or less known to him, and similarly in the case of other relevant differences, assigning to each what is fitting. And while he chooses to contribute to the pleasure of others for its own sake and is cautious about causing others pain, he is guided by the consequences at stake [...] And for the sake of a great pleasure in the future, he will cause a little pain now. Such, then, is the person marked by the middle characteristic. (NE 1127a; NE 1126b25)*

So if the seminary student has reason to believe that his seminary leader and other students are depending on him to make the promised appointment on time, and he must make a less than ideal choice between assisting a stranger in an alleyway or instead assisting many of his religious peers, it cannot be assumed without argument that assisting the stranger is the most praiseworthy choice in this no-win situation. Moreover, the student might reason that if they fail to assist the stranger now they will always have plenty of other opportunities to assist other strangers later since there are over 643,000 people that are homeless in the US on any given night (Eng 2012; Witte 2012). But if the seminary student fails to keep their promised appointment, then their very career as a future seminarian may be put on the line, and if they fail to become a seminarian then they might resultantly fail to help many others later in the ways that seminarians are excellent at helping. Prinz (2009) charges Sreenivasan (2002) with mistaking rationalization for reason but it is clear that this charge is misguided since the question Sreenivasan (2002) has raised is not *whether*

*one should act virtuously* in these cases but rather *whether assisting in these cases is what counts as the most virtuous course of action* given the reasons and alternatives one must consider (p. 60-61). So the assumption that assisting strangers is always best, irrespective of any alternative choices and potentially defeating reasons to the contrary, is not as straightforwardly plausible as situationists often assume, since one can be persecuted here either way. Even Darley and Batson (1973) concluded with such a point in their final analysis:

*Why were the seminarians hurrying? Because the experimenter, whom the subject was helping, was depending on him to get to a particular place quickly. In other words, he was in conflict between stopping to help the victim and continuing on his way to help the experimenter. And this is often true of people in a hurry; they hurry because someone depends on their being somewhere. Conflict, rather than callousness, can explain their failure to stop. (p. 108)*

So under further consideration of these problems with the situationist analysis of the Darley and Batson (1973) study it can be concluded that situationists are not in fact warranted in claiming that these results undermine the Aristotelian theses (A1) and (A2) and instead support the situationist theses (S1) and (S2).

#### **Isen and Levin (1972): Effect of Feeling Good on Helping**

Next consider the empirical study conducted by Isen and Levin (1972) where the experimenter used a public payphone at the mall to set up the control and experimental conditions. Subjects in the experimental and control condition were those using the payphone that did and did not have a dime left in the coin return slot by the experimenter, respectively. While the subjects were making their calls, a female confederate pretended to window shop while observing the subjects through a reflection in one of the store windows, so that the confederate could see when the subject was about to leave the payphone. Once the subject left the payphone the confederate started walking in the same direction as the subject, and when slightly ahead would drop a folder full of papers in front of the subject. The dependent variable in this study was whether subjects would help a stranger pick up papers that they dropped in front of them and the independent variable was whether the subjects were in the control condition or in the experimental condition. Subjects consisted of 41 adults in shopping malls located in San Francisco and Philadelphia. The results from this study showed that 1 out of 25 subjects (4%) helped in the control condition whereas 14 out of 16 subjects (87.5%) helped in the experimental condition, with a Fisher exact test on the data showing a significant relationship between receiving a dime and helping (Isen & Levin 1972, p. 387)<sup>4</sup>. Situationists argue that the results from this study offer damaging empirical evidence against the viability of the Aristotelian conception of virtuous personal characteristics. For example, Doris (1998) claims that this study challenges

<sup>4</sup> Of the 41 total subjects, 25 were randomly assigned to the control condition without the dime and 16 to the experimental condition with the dime. According to a Fisher exact test  $p < .005$  for females and  $p = .025$  for males.

Aristotelians on the grounds that it “exemplifies a 70-year “situationist” experimental tradition in social and personality psychology, a tradition which has repeatedly demonstrated that the behavioral reliability expected [...] is not revealed in the systematic observation of behavior” (p. 504).

### Reconsidering Isen and Levin (1972)

Situationists argued that the results from the study conducted by Isen and Levin (1972) shows that subjects behave differently in situations of positive affect than they ought to behave if they in fact possessed the relevant personal characteristics. Since situationists interpreted the result that 1 out of 25 subjects (4%) helped in the control condition whereas 14 out of 16 subjects (87.5%) helped in the experimental condition as showing that personal characteristics are not resistant to contrary situational (affective) pressures, they argued that the results from this study undermine the Aristotelian thesis (A2) and instead support the situationist thesis (S2). Since situationists also interpreted the results from this study as showing that behavioral variation is due to different situations (i.e., whether subjects were in a condition of neutral or positive affect) rather than different personal characteristics, they argued that the results from this study also undermine the Aristotelian thesis (A1) and instead support the situationist thesis (S1).

The major problem with the situationist analysis of this study concerns the fact that this was not a replicable finding. For instance, Blevins and Murphy (1974) used a similar experimental scenario in a subsequent study and found that in the control condition 15 of the 35 subjects (42.8%) helped whereas 20 out of 35 (57.2%) of them did not, and that in the experimental condition 6 of the 15 subjects (40%) helped whereas 9 out of 15 (60%) of them did not. In contrast to the findings of Isen and Levin (1972) Fisher exact tests from the Blevins and Murphy (1974) study indicated that there was no relationship between finding a dime and helping (p. 326). In yet another study, Weyant and Clark (1976) found that subjects who found a dime did not mail an apparently lost letter more often than those that did not find a dime. The experimenters found that in the control condition 15 of the 52 subjects (28.8%) helped whereas 37 out of 52 (71.2%) of them did not and that in the experimental condition 12 of the 54 subjects (22.2%) helped whereas 42 out of 54 (77.8%) of them did not. Once again, contrary to the results from Isen and Levin (1972) Fisher exact tests from this study by Weyant and Clark (1976) indicated that there was no relationship between finding a dime and helping (p. 109). Evidently then, in at least two subsequent studies that attempted to replicate the effect of feeling good on helping that was reported by Isen and Levin (1972) no such effect had been found.

So under further consideration of these problem with the situationist analysis of the Isen and Levin (1972) study it can be concluded that situationists are not in fact warranted in claiming that these results undermine the Aristotelian theses (A1) and (A2) and instead support the situationist theses (S1) and (S2).

### Milgram (1963): Behavioral Study of Obedience

Finally, consider the empirical study conducted by Milgram (1963) where an experimenter informed subjects that they would be participating in an experiment aiming to study the effects of punishment on learning. The subject served as the “teacher” while a confederate served as the “learner” in a learning scenario consisting of a word-pair association task, and the subject was instructed by the experimenter to administer electric shocks of increasing intensity to the learner for each incorrect response the learner provided during the task. The experimenter instructed the subject to give the learner 10 seconds to respond to each question, but to treat the absence of a response from the learner as a wrong answer in which case they were to be shocked as usual. A simulated shock generator ranging from 15 to 450 volts was used to administer electric shocks of increasing intensity as punishment to the learner for an incorrect or lack of response. Although the learner gives no sign of protest before 300 volts is administered they start pounding on the wall in protest once the 300-volt threshold is crossed. Once the 315-volt threshold is crossed, the learner becomes silent and no longer continues responding to the task. If at any time during the experiment the subject expressed an unwillingness to continue administering shocks to the learner, the experimenter would respond to the subject with a series of 4 prods of increasing force: (1) “Please continue,” *or* “Please go on,” (2) “The experiment requires that you continue,” (3) “It is absolutely essential that you continue,” and (4) “You have no other choice, you must go on” (Milgram 1963, p. 374). In this study the dependent variable was the maximum shock the subject was willing to administer to the learner under the direction of the experimenter before refusing to continue with the study any further. The experimenter was a 31 year-old adult male biology teacher, the learner was a 47 year-old adult male, and subjects consisted of 40 adult males from 20 to 50 years of age. The experiment was conducted in an elegant laboratory at Yale University. The results from this study showed that all 40 subjects administered electric shocks at least up to the 300-volt level, at which point the learner started pounding on the wall in protest. Yet 14 of the 40 subjects did defy the experimenter at some point during the experiment by refusing to administer any further electric shocks to the learner. Of these 14 defiant subjects that refused to administer further electric shocks to the learner, 5 of them refused to go past the 300-volt level, 4 refused to go past the 315-volt level, 2 refused to go past the 330-volt level, 1 refused to go past the 345-volt level, 1 refused to go past the 360-volt level, and 1 refused to go past the 375-volt level. The remaining 26 of the 40 subjects fully obeyed the experimenter through the end by administering electric shocks up to the maximum 450-volt level (p. 376). Situationists argue that the results from this study undermine the viability of the Aristotelian conception of virtuous personal characteristics. Harman (1999) for instance claims that this study challenges Aristotelians on the grounds that “*all* subjects were willing to go at least to the 300 volt level”



(p. 322) while Doris (1998) further maintains that “subjects who reluctantly consented to torture the recalcitrant “victim” [...] were overridden by misguided feelings of obligation, or perhaps intimidation, generated by the experimenter’s insistence on their continued participation in the “learning experiment”” (p. 510).

### Reconsidering Milgram (1963)

Situationists argued that the results from the study conducted by Milgram (1963) shows that subjects behave differently in situations under authority than they ought to behave if they in fact possessed the relevant personal characteristics. Since situationists interpreted the result that all 40 subjects administered electric shocks at least up to the 300-*volt* level as showing that personal characteristics are not resistant to contrary situational (authoritative) pressures, they argued that the results from this study undermine the Aristotelian thesis (A2) and instead support the situationist thesis (S2).

The first problem with the situationist analysis of the Milgram (1963) study concerns the fact that it neglects the amount of behavioral robustness that this study does in fact find. After all, this study did find *some* significant resistance to situational (authoritative) pressures, which may be taken to represent at least *some* significant robustness in behavior. More specifically, in this study it was found that 14 of the 40 subjects did in fact disobey the experimenter at some point by refusing to continue administering shocks even though 26 of the 40 subjects fully obeyed the experimenter to the maximum 450-*volt* level. Granted, all 40 subjects administered shocks at least up to the 300-*volt* level, but also recall that before this point the learner that was being shocked *was not even protesting* to the shocks. It was only once the 300-*volt* level had been reached that the learner would *start* to pound on the wall in protest, and at *this* point subjects *did* start disobeying the experimenter. Of the 14 defiant subjects, 5 of them refused to go past the 300-*volt* level, 4 refused to go past the 315-*volt* level, 2 refused to go past the 330-*volt* level, 1 refused to go past the 345-*volt* level, 1 refused to go past the 360-*volt* level, and 1 refused to go past the 375-*volt* level. The facts regarding this differential disobedience cannot simply be selectively ignored by situationists, and it is not insignificant either to consider that this disobedience persisted through four increasingly forceful prods by the experimenter to continue. “To have different character traits,” Harman (1999) argues, subjects “must be disposed to act differently in the same circumstances” (p. 317), and it is clear from this study that there are in fact behavioral differences between subjects within the same situation. So in holding that “we are safest predicting, for a particular situation, that a person will behave pretty much as most others would” (Doris 1998, p. 507) the situationist fails to provide an account nuanced enough to explain the behavioral differences *within* this same situation.

The second problem with the situationist analysis of this study concerns the fact that it simply assumes without argument that it was obvious for the subject to have

reasonably disobeyed the experimenter before the point at which the learner starts protesting (i.e., at the 300-*volt* level) irrespective of the reasons the subject might have for continuing. The focus of this point is to question whether this assumption is legitimate. There were after all strong prima facie reasons to believe in the trustworthiness of the experimenter and situation. Recall that the experimenter was a biology teacher dressed in a gray technician’s coat and that the experiment took place “on the grounds of Yale University in the elegant interaction laboratory,” which Milgram (1963) explains, “is relevant to the perceived legitimacy of the experiment” (p. 72). A case could be made that if a normal person can have prima facie reasons to trust anyone to run an experiment it is probably a natural scientist running experiments in an elegant Yale laboratory, so subjects did have prima facie reason not to suspect any foul play, especially when *no reason had yet been given to think otherwise*. Indeed, at the outset the experimenter explicitly informed subjects that, “Although the shocks can be extremely painful, they cause no permanent tissue damage” (p. 373). So one might wonder: is a bit of pain to someone that willingly volunteered for it the price that must be paid for the progress of science and humanity as a whole? We all pay our dues toward the greater good once in a while, don’t we? So maybe one who is not expert in cases like these should, for at least the time being, defer to the expert until provided with strong reasons to think otherwise. And no strong reasons were provided prior to the 300-*volt* level, where the learner would *start* protesting. Further, in a subsequent variation of the experiment (experiment 13) Milgram (1974) found that when “an ordinary man” instead of an experimenter with presumed authority directed the subject to administer shocks, significantly more subjects disobeyed, with 16 of the 20 subjects (80%) disobeying whereas only 4 of the 20 subjects (20%) fully obeyed. Shalala (1974) also reports from another study involving soldiers at Fort Knox that subjects were significantly less obedient to the orders of the experimenter when the experimenter was a Private instead of a Lieutenant Colonel. Presumably this is because the commands of everyday people and Privates do not carry the same force and legitimacy as do the commands of Yale experimenters and Lieutenant Colonels, respectively, since the latter are both higher in status as well as more knowledgeable in their relevant respects. In yet another variation of the experiment (experiment 10) when the location of the experiment was changed from the elegant laboratory at Yale to an office building in Bridgeport, the percentage of subjects that fully obeyed also dropped, with 26 of the 40 subjects (65%) fully obeying in the laboratory at Yale and 19 of the 40 subjects (47.5%) fully obeying in the office building in Bridgeport. With weaker prima facie reasons to believe in the trustworthiness of the experimenter and situation we therefore do find less obedient behavior, and in all cases a significant proportion of people do in fact stop administering shocks once the person being shocked starts protesting.

So under further consideration of these problems with the situationist analysis of the Milgram (1963) study it can be concluded that situationists are not in fact warranted

in claiming that these results undermine the Aristotelian thesis (A2) and instead support the situationist thesis (S2).

It is perhaps worthwhile to point out here that Mischel (1979) explained in “On the Interface of Cognition and Personality: Beyond the Person-Situation Debate” how:

*A decade ago I published a book that was widely taken as a broadside attack on personality. Many also saw it as an attempt to replace dispositions and indeed people with situations and environments as our units of study. These effects of Personality and Assessment (Mischel, 1968), these widespread perceptions of it as a situationist's manifesto aimed at undoing the role of dispositions, were far from my intentions. (p. 740)*

Now in this article we have discussed at least ten points of concern with the situationist use of the four salient studies in psychology that have become representative of the situationist challenge (Prinz 2009, p. 119) including those conducted by Hartshorne and May (1928), Milgram (1963), Isen and Levin (1972) and Darley and Batson (1973), and found that the situationist did not have a strong case in their attempt to use results from these studies to argue against the viability of Aristotelian moral psychology. Further, we saw that many claims that Aristotle makes actually offered insight into the situationist misinterpretation and misuse of these empirical results. It was discussed for instance how Aristotle suggested that the behavior of children may be less interrelated than that of adults (e.g., NE 1119b5-15, 1142a10-15, 1143b10; 1103b20-25, 1104b5-10) and that considerations of human behavior must take into account both the reasons one has for acting (e.g., NE 1105a30, 1107a-5, 1115b10) as well as the relevance of the characteristics one has developed with respect to a given situation (e.g., NE 1114a5-10, 1116b5-10, 1141b-20). Now, since the situationist challenge, if it were to be successful, would require getting Aristotle's own account right as well as the empirical facts, in the next section we turn to finally consider whether situationists have in fact provided a sufficiently adequate account of Aristotelian moral psychology.

### Virtuous Characteristics and Aristotelian Moral Psychology

In this final section I argue that the situationist challenge fails for more than advancing exaggerated claims that are not supported by empirical evidence. Here I further argue that the situationist also fails to provide an accurate account of Aristotelian moral psychology that is supported by textual evidence. Evidently a solid situationist attack against Aristotelian moral psychology requires getting both the empirical facts and the account of Aristotle right, so here I present several points of consideration suggesting that the situationist has not presented a sufficiently adequate account of Aristotelian moral psychology but rather an oversimplified caricature of it that goes against the grain of much Aristotelian text.

First reconsider how the situationist conception of Aristotelian personal characteristics motivates their attribution of theses (A1) and (A2) to Aristotelians. Harman (1999) for one suggested that the Aristotelian view of personal characteristics consists in broad-based dispositions

rather than narrow-based dispositions (p. 318), and as a way to explicate this distinction between broad-based and narrow-based dispositions Prinz (2009) provides the example that “being talkative is broad-based, while being talkative in the cafeteria at lunch is not” (p. 119). On this view a broad-based disposition such as “being talkative” consists in a disposition that is *unqualified* and *context-insensitive* since the disposition of “being talkative” as such is not qualified to certain situations and sensitive to certain contexts. Yet on the other hand, according to this view, a narrow-based disposition such as “being talkative in the cafeteria at lunch” consists in a disposition that is qualified and context-sensitive since the disposition of “being talkative in the cafeteria at lunch” is qualified to certain situations and sensitive to certain contexts, namely, those pertaining to the cafeteria and lunch. The situationist charge is that Aristotelians view personal characteristics as broad rather than narrow. Further, because the situationist views Aristotelian characteristics as broad-based dispositions that are unqualified and context-insensitive, they assume that Aristotelian characteristics must also be invariant across all situations (as expressed in (A1)) and rigidly robust in all situations (as expressed in (A2)). Presumably the reasoning here is that if broad-based dispositions such as “being talkative” are unqualified then they should be invariant across situations (for if not, then they would be qualified by these varying situations) and if broad-based dispositions such as “being talkative” are context-insensitive then they should resist contrary situational pressures (for if not, then they would be sensitive to these situational pressures).

Yet it is doubtful that Aristotelians actually maintain that personal characteristics are broad-based in the way that the situationist has characterized, or that this situationist attribution is supported by firm textual evidence, because Aristotle makes many explicit claims in *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* suggesting that the situationist account is problematic. At 1148b5-10 for example Aristotle explicitly discusses the point about characteristics in the *qualified* rather than *unqualified* sense:

*people say “lack of self-restraint” while specifying something additional about each case, as people say, for example, “bad doctor” or “bad actor” about someone they would not say is bad simply [...] one would not in these cases speak of their being bad simply [...] Hence we assert that someone is lacking self-restraint, adding also “when it comes to spiritedness,” just as in the cases of honor and gain as well. (NE 1148b5-10)*

Although situationists often assume that Aristotelians conceive of individuals in such broad terms as “a person of good character” or “bad character” (Harman 1999, p. 318-319), that is to say, as having character that is *unqualifiedly good* or *unqualifiedly bad*, it is clear from his discussion at 1148b5-10 of *Nicomachean Ethics* that this is certainly not Aristotle's view. In this passage Aristotle is not suggesting that the person lacking self-restraint is “bad” simply (lacking all virtues in all respects), nor is Aristotle even suggesting the weaker claim that the person is lacking in “self-restraint” simply (lacking the particular virtue of self-restraint (temperance) in all respects), but is merely

suggesting that the person is lacking in self-restraint “when it comes to spiritedness” (lacking the particular virtue of self-restraint (temperance) with respect to spiritedness). Aristotle also claims earlier in *Nicomachean Ethics* that “the definitions of honor, prudence, and pleasure are distinct and differ in the very respect in which they are goods. It is not the case, therefore, that the good is something common in reference to a single *idea*” (NE 1096b25; 1096a15-30). Here Aristotle is explaining that there are goods *with respect* to honor, goods *with respect* to prudence, and goods *with respect* to pleasure, but not that these are all instances of some *common unqualified good*. Aristotle repeatedly warns against speaking in such generalities, making himself especially clear on this point in *Politics* by advising that “people who talk in generalities, saying that virtue is a good condition of the soul, or correct action, or something of that sort, are deceiving themselves. It is far better to enumerate the virtues, as Gorgias does, than to define them in this general way” (Pol. 1260a20-25; NE 1127a15). It is thus evidently clear that the situationist claim that Aristotelians conceive of personal characteristics as broadly *unqualified* dispositions is not only unsupported by textual evidence but also does not cohere with many points we actually find Aristotle making in both *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*.

The situationist assumption that Aristotelians conceive of personal characteristics as broadly context-insensitive dispositions is also unsupported by textual evidence since Aristotle makes several explicit claims in *Nicomachean Ethics* suggesting that this situationist assumption is problematic. For example, at 1115a20 of *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle explicitly discusses the point about personal characteristics being evinced in certain situations yet not in others:

*though some may be cowards in the dangers of war, they are nonetheless liberal and cheerfully confident in the face of a loss of money [which is also a danger but of a different kind]. And someone who is afraid of wanton violence against his children and wife, or of malicious envy or of something of this sort, is not a coward. Nor if a person is confident when he is about to be flogged is he courageous.*

The point here should be especially clear in light of what has been discussed concerning the fourth problem with the situationist use of the Darley and Batson (1973) study and the second problem with the situationist use of the Milgram (1963) study. For the problem with the situationist use of these studies concerned the fact that they simply assumed without argument how the subjects *ought* to have acted in these situations without taking into consideration their *reasons* for acting. In the case Aristotle describes at 1115a20 of *Nicomachean Ethics*, a situationist might similarly assume without argument that if a man is courageous then he ought not to have fear in *any* situation, even if someone were committing “violence against his children and wife.” But as it was discussed regarding the role of reasons in the helping case from the Darley and Batson (1973) study, Aristotle similarly points out at 1115a20 that when a man considers the unfortunate situation of someone committing “wanton violence against his children and wife,” he has good reason to be afraid and that this does not imply

that he is a coward. Courage and friendliness are not *brute dispositions* that are *blind to reasons* and *independent of situations* on the Aristotelian view, despite the fact that situationists often suppose this, but are rather characteristics that are *guided by reason* and *relevant to the particulars of the situation at hand*. A soldier with courage is not skilled in the way that he is because he is blind to the particulars of situational contexts, but rather “is skilled in action, at least – for he is someone concerned with ultimate *particular things*” (NE 1146a5) and “does what is noblest *given the circumstances*, just as a good general makes use, with the greatest military skill, of *the army he has* and a shoemaker makes the most beautiful shoe out of *the leather given him*. It holds in the same manner with all the other experts as well” (NE 1101a-10, my emphasis). Medal of Honor recipient Staff Sergeant Giunta, who was commended with the highest of all military awards for saving the lives of his fellow soldiers after being ambushed by insurgents in Afghanistan, offers an insightful account of the developed characteristics of a soldier in his (2012) memoir *Living with Honor*:

*In any firefight, there is an instinctive, knee-jerk reaction that immediately follows the first crack of gunfire. Everyone responds differently, but training and experience helped us deal with the initial shock, to resist the body's natural urge to flee – which sounds like a better idea than it really is, since you're likely to get shot in the back. Instead, we learned to seek out the position from which the shot had been fired, to use our ears and eyes to determine the proximity of the enemies position, and to ascertain whether we were in a reasonably safe place. All of this would happen in a matter of seconds [...] The point is, training informs your response, to the point that whatever fear you might feel is channeled appropriately. (p. 245-246, 127)*

So it seems that a continually cultivated characteristic helps one *tune into the particulars of certain kinds of situations* and not blind one to them completely, as situationists suggest. In fact, it has now been well-established through recent empirical work from the psychology and neuroscience of perception (especially in language and music) that human sensitivities are indeed capable of development and fine-tuning through practice-based experience and perceptual learning (Hannon & Trehub 2005; Curtis & Bharucha 2009; Hyde, Lerch, Norton, Forgeard, Winner, Evans, & Schlaug 2009; Kraus, Skoe, Parbery-Clark, & Ashley 2009; Pons, Lewkowicz, Soto-Faraco, & Sebastian-Galles 2009; Schnupp, Nelken, & King 2011; Croom 2012a; Croom 2012b; Croom 2014a). For example, Poulsen, Picton, and Paus (2009) conducted a longitudinal EEG study on participants at 10 and 11.5 years of age ( $n = 60$ ) and found that there was persistent maturation of the cortical mechanisms for auditory processing from childhood into middle adulthood and explained that this may result from experience-driven myelination of corticocortical and corticothalamic projections (p. 220-233).

So Doris (1998) is quite wrong in asserting that, “Aristotle (1984: 1105a28-bl) insists that for an action to be considered truly virtuous it must be *determined* by the appropriately developed character of the agent” and that Aristotelians suggest we “develop characters that will *determine our behavior* in ways significantly *independent*



of circumstance” (p. 515, my emphasis)<sup>6</sup>. The situationist characterization of Aristotelian moral psychology here is clearly insufficient because it neglects the important role of the intellect in Aristotle’s account. Rather than being *determined* by character alone, which Doris (1998) and Harman (1999) consider to be *brute* dispositions, Aristotle on the contrary suggests that virtuous deeds “arise in accord with the virtues [...] first, if he acts *knowingly*; second, if he acts by *choosing* and by choosing the actions in question for their own sake; and, third, if he acts while being in a steady and unwavering state” (NE 1105a30). Here Aristotle evidently stresses the role of *intellect* in at least two of the three conditions necessary for virtuous action, with the second condition regarding *choice* pertaining to what was discussed in the helping case from the Darley and Batson (1973) study, where it was stressed that reasons between alternative choices must be taken into consideration in order to understand which action out of a set of alternatives is *best*. It is important to not neglect this point for Aristotle repeatedly attempts to drills this point in. For instance, concerning things that are frightening to everyone he says that, “the courageous man [...] will fear things of this sort, then, but he will endure them in the way that he ought and as *reason* commands” (NE 1115b10, my emphasis).

Yet notice that the third condition for virtuous action Aristotle mentioned above stated that an agent must act “while being in a steady and unwavering state” (NE 1105a30). It is this third condition that situationists have cherry picked in support of their claim that Aristotle is committed to broad-based dispositions. Yet despite the fact that situationists often draw upon the supposition that Aristotelian characteristics are “firm and unchangeable” (quoted in Doris 1998, p. 506) in their presentation of Aristotelian characteristics as maintaining a commitment to broad-based dispositions, it is important to realize that there is an ambiguity in how this third condition can be understood (note also that more recent translations interpret the passage at 1105a30-1105b as “steady and unwavering” rather than “firm and unchangeable”; see Aristotle 2011; Croom 2014b). In other words, a commitment to the claim that a characteristic *C* is *steady and unwavering* could be understood as a commitment to the claim that *C* exhibits *either* stability<sup>Intra</sup> *or* stability<sup>Inter</sup>:

- stability<sup>Intra</sup>: *Intra-situational* stability with respect to relatively specific kinds of situations across time.
- stability<sup>Inter</sup>: *Inter-situational* stability with respect to relatively different kinds of situations.

As an example of *intra-situational* stability consider that an Army Ranger may exhibit a personal

characteristic that is stable *within* combat situations on consecutive days (e.g., they are not prevented from facing the challenges of combat due to fear), whereas a first-grader may not exhibit a personal characteristic that is stable within academic situations on consecutive days (e.g., they are prevented from facing the challenges of reading aloud due to fear on some days but not on others). As an example of *inter-situational* stability consider that an Army Ranger may exhibit a personal characteristic that is stable within certain situations (e.g., friendliness, when with fellow Army Ranger mates) but not in other very different situations (e.g., unfriendliness, when with militant enemies). So in suggesting that a virtuous characteristic is “steady and unwavering,” it is evident that there are at least two possible ways to construe what this might consist in for Aristotle (Sreenivasan 2002, p. 49-50)<sup>7</sup>.

Doris (1998) and Harman (1999) think Aristotle is committed to *inter-situational* stability with respect to relatively different kinds of situations, since they ascribe (A1) to Aristotle and think Aristotle is committed to the claim that personal character broadly determines behavior irrespective of context (e.g., Doris 1998, p. 515). But this interpretation is inconsistent with many claims Aristotle actually makes, such as at 1115a20 of *Nicomachean Ethics* where he discusses how some people may be cowards in the face of war but not in the face of losing money, which are both dangers. Aristotle further claims that the virtues of personal character must be cultivated (NE 1114a5-10) and that this is the aim of proper education (NE 1104b5-10), a point that Doris (1998) and Harman (1999) both acknowledge, yet it would remain mysterious why Aristotle would claim this if he was really committed to the view that personal characteristics are “firm and unchangeable” (quoted in Doris 1998, p. 506). Instead, it is clear that personal characteristics for Aristotle are changeable and capable of cultivation, but that they take time to cultivate since this cultivation of characteristics requires being “continually engaged in the relevant activity” (NE 1114a5-10). Aristotle further suggests that this continual engagement must carry on beyond one’s youth and throughout life: “it is not sufficient if people when they are young attain the correct rearing and care; rather, once they have reached adulthood, they must also make a practice of these things and be thus habituated” (NE 1179b30-1180a5). One shouldn’t expect any *virtue* or *excellence* to come *too cheaply*. But through this accumulation of experience and cultivation of personal characteristics, one eventually acquires a relevantly fine-tuned readiness for perception-action and *intra-situational* stability with respect to certain relevant kinds of situations across time. This is in fact consistent with recent work in evolutionary personality psychology that suggests that

<sup>6</sup> Merritt (2000) also misleadingly suggests that “Aristotle requires that genuine virtues be firmly secured in one’s own individual constitution, in such a way that one’s reliability in making good practical choices depends as little as possible on contingent external factors” (p. 375). This claim is misleading because Aristotle explicitly writes that “‘Nonetheless, it [happiness] manifestly requires external goods in addition [...] For it is impossible or not easy for someone without equipment to do what is noble: many things are done through instruments, as it were – through friends, wealth, and political power. Those who are bereft of some of these (for example, good birth, good children, or beauty) disfigure their blessedness [...] Just as we said, then, [happiness] seems to require some such external prosperity in addition” (NE 1099a30-2099b5).

<sup>7</sup> The situationist’s misinterpretation of Aristotle here is further complicated by the fact that situationists have not themselves provided a clear account of situations. For further criticism on the situationist’s lack of properly defining what situation are, see Sabini and Silver (2005).

“Natural selection has created in humans psychological mechanisms that are highly sensitive to context, not rigid “instincts” that operate regardless of context” (Buss 1991, p. 481-482). So for instance, a combat soldier will have acquired experience and combat readiness through repeated training and consecutive deployments (Giunta 2012) and so will be expected to remain unwavering in courage on upcoming (*intra*-situational) deployments, but will not likewise be expected to remain unwavering in friendliness if captured behind (*inter*-situational) enemy lines. It is evident then that not only is the situationist assumption that Aristotelians conceive of personal characteristics as broadly *context-insensitive* dispositions unsupported by the textual evidence, but that it also does not cohere with many claims that Aristotle explicitly makes in *Nicomachean Ethics* and elsewhere.

To briefly review the main points we have covered: the situationist assumed that Aristotelians conceive of personal characteristics as being broad rather than narrow, and because the situationist conceived of Aristotelian characteristics as broad-based dispositions that are unqualified and context-insensitive they assumed that Aristotelian characteristics must also be invariant across all situations (as expressed in (A1)) and rigidly robust in all situations (as expressed in (A2)). Yet by considering the actual textual evidence we find that Aristotle does not conceive of personal characteristics as broad-based dispositions that are unqualified and context-insensitive and so does not assume that personal characteristics must also be invariant across all situations (as expressed in (A1)) and rigidly robust in all situations (as expressed in (A2)).

The situationist also claimed that Aristotelians are committed to (A3), which is also partly inaccurate since the relationship among the characteristics for Aristotle is more complex than the situationist suggests, in that for Aristotle some of the virtues (such as the virtues of intellect) presuppose others (such as the virtues of character) but not vice versa (NE 1151a15-20, 1179b25-30; Aquinas 1993, p. 446; Reeve 2012, p. 131). But it is unnecessary to further investigate the details of that argument here since the only study that situationists used to argue against (A3) and support (S3) instead was the Hartshorne and May (1928) study conducted *on children*. But it stands to reason that even an Aristotelian integrity thesis that somewhat differed in detail from (A3) would still not have been undermined by the situationist use of the Hartshorne and May (1928) study since it has already been discussed why the results from studies on the characteristics of children cannot be straightforwardly carried over towards conclusions about the characteristics of *adults* or all *human beings*. It was further discussed how subsequent studies suggested that children behave more consistently than Hartshorne and May (1928) originally concluded (Burton 1963; Hoffman 2000; Kochanska & Aksan 2006), that significantly higher behavioral consistency was found when error variance was corrected for (Rushton, Chrisjohn, & Fekken 1981), and that behavior becomes more closely interrelated as people get older (Blasi 1980; Sigelman & Rider 2009). Contrary to what situationists suggest the results from these

empirical studies are rather consistent with what Aristotle claimed about children especially being lured with varying pleasures “from all sides,” and thus especially in need of proper habituation and education (NE 1119b5-15, 1142a10-15, 1143b10; 1103b20-25, 1104b5-10). So there is in fact empirical evidence along with *prima facie* reasons to suppose that some interrelation of personal characteristics among adults does exist, which is not inconsistent with the supposition of some form of the integrity thesis. But a fuller and more detailed discussion of Aristotle’s own integrity thesis must be reserved for another occasion.

What is not being challenged here is that Aristotle believed in the stability, robustness, and integrity of virtuous characteristics, but only that situationists have correctly ascribed to Aristotle conceptions about these that are accurately Aristotelian. In other words, if Aristotle holds theses regarding the stability, robustness, and integrity of characteristics, then they are not plausibly as the situationist has characterized them with the aforementioned (A) theses, and as situationists have discussed them in the literature (see especially Doris 1998; Harman 1999; Harman 2000). Yet in rejecting commitment to the aforementioned (A) theses as the situationist has characterized them, the Aristotelian need not therefore be straightforwardly committed to the opposing situationist (S) theses. For as it has been discussed herein Aristotle is not committed to these extreme theses either. Unlike the situationist, Aristotle is not framing his understanding of moral psychology in terms of personal characteristics versus situations, with one or the other being solely determinative of behavior, but rather pursues a more nuanced middle path between these two dichotomous extremes.

The desire to pursue a more nuanced middle path between such extremely dichotomous positions is perhaps a main reason that moral psychologists have increasingly been returning their attention to Aristotle. For example, Haidt and Joseph (2004) have discussed how:

*Aristotle himself recognized the constraining effect of human beings’ embodied and situated nature on ethical experience. As Martha Nussbaum points out, Aristotle defined virtues by reference to universal features of human beings and their environments that combine to define spheres of human experience in which we make normative appraisals of our own and others’ conduct – not unlike what above we called persistent adaptive challenges. Aristotle’s and Nussbaum’s approach is also a nativist one, albeit one that locates the innate moral content in both the organism and the environment. Our four modules of intuitive ethics are in a sense a pursuit of this Aristotelian project. (p. 63)*

Haidt and Joseph (2008) subsequently write that “there is a growing consilience between philosophical writings on virtue and emotions, empirical research on moral functioning, and cognitive science, a consilience that suggests that virtue theory may yield deep insights into the architecture of human social and moral cognition” (chapter 19; cf. Haidt, 2006), and even more recently, Graham, Haidt, Koleva, Motyl, Iyer, Wojcik, and Ditto (2013) explicitly point out in their contribution to *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* that “Aristotle was an early moral pluralist [...] We are unabashed pluralists, and in this

chapter, we will try to convince you that you should be, too” (p. 57; for further evidence supporting the usefulness of this view as a means to simultaneously increase the scope and sharpen the resolution of psychological views of morality cf. Graham, Nosek, Haidt, Iyer, Koleva & Ditto 2011, p. 366-385). So properly understood, it is evident that the Aristotelian view is not only consistent with empirical data from developmental science but can also offer important insights for integrating moral psychology with its biological roots in our natural and social life.

### Conclusion

In this article I first introduced the situationist challenge against Aristotelian moral psychology and reviewed the theses situationists ascribed to Aristotle as well as the theses situationists claimed to hold themselves. Next I reviewed the details and results of the four paradigmatic empirical studies in psychology that have become representative of the situationist challenge (Prinz 2009, p. 119), including those conducted by Hartshorne and May (1928), Darley and Batson (1973), Isen and Levin (1972), and Milgram (1963), and how situationists incorrectly used results from these studies against the Aristotelian conception of virtuous characteristics. Finally, in the last section I offered a closer look at the Aristotelian text on moral psychology and showed that situationists have advanced inaccurate characterizations of his account that go against the grain of much actual Aristotelian text. In so doing, my purpose was to undermine the situationist challenge against Aristotelian moral psychology by carefully considering major problems with the conclusions that situationists have drawn from the empirical data, as well as by challenging the accuracy of their characterization of the Aristotelian view. In fact I have argued that when properly understood the Aristotelian view is not only consistent with empirical data from developmental science but can also offer important insights for integrating moral psychology with its biological roots in our natural and social life.

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