Minor Tweaks, Major Payoffs:

The Problems and Promise of Situationism in Moral Philosophy

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Throughout the 1980s, pharmaceutical companies bestowed lavish gifts on health care practitioners, including free travel, equipment, and accommodation. The size and frequency of these gifts raised concerns that the medical profession's integrity was being compromised. As a result, voluntary guidelines were introduced in 1991 limiting their value to $100 or less. It was thought that smaller gifts such as pens, pads, calendars, and samples of drugs would pose no threat. This line of thinking was false. Several studies now confirm that even minor gifts of this sort can lead to major changes in physicians' practices, including rising volumes of prescriptions, erratic prescribing patterns, preferences for new drugs with unproven benefits, and increased prescription spending overall.[1] Despite the substantial evidence demonstrating these effects, physicians regularly deny that small gifts alter their practices, and if not for the work of social scientists, many outside the profession would probably agree. After all, how could these intelligent, highly trained, and rational individuals be swayed by so little? Such sensible thoughts would have been radically misguided. Minor trinkets yield major payoffs for pharmaceutical companies.

In this paper, I argue that something similar holds true in the realm of interpersonal morality. Our interactions with others can also be shaped by small details of our situations, and the effects can be just as considerable. Indeed, our sensitivity to immediate situational triggers has not escaped the notice of recent moral philosophers, who have explored the issue in the form of situationist social psychology, or situationism — the thesis that we routinely underestimate the extent to which minor situational variables influence morally significant behavior.[2] Situationism has been seen as a threat to prevailing lay and philosophical theories of character, personhood, and agency, leading many

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1. For a review of the literature, together with a theoretical discussion, see Katz et al. (2003).

2. The literature on situationism is sizable and growing. See, for example, Annas (2003), Athanassoulis (2000), Doris (1998; 2005; 2002), Flanagan (1991), Harman (1999; 2000; 2003), Kamtekar (2004), Merritt (2000), Miller (2003); Nelkin (2005) Prinz (2009), Sabini & Silber (2005), Sreenivasan (2002), Vranas (2005), and Webber (2006).

philosophers to advocate what I call a seek/avoid strategy — an admonition to carefully select one's situational contexts in order to regulate one's behavior. Since situations influence our behavior, we ought to seek out situations enhancing moral behavior and avoid those compromising it (see, *e.g.*, Doris 2002; Harman 2003; Merritt 2000; Samuels & Casebeer 2005). While this strategy has much to recommend itself, it is limited in application to those situations that admit of such straightforward predictions; alas, many of the situations we encounter elicit neither bad nor good behavior *simpliciter*. More importantly, the strategy accentuates a person/situation dichotomy that is untenable; we do not simply *react* to external situations, but we also *shape* our situations through the variables we ourselves introduce.

Drawing on classical Confucian ethical theory, I argue that a deeper lesson of situationism lies in highlighting the *interconnectedness* of all social behavior, how we are inextricably implicated in the actions of others, and how minor tweaks in our own behavior — such as our facial expressions, posture, tone of voice, and other seemingly minor details of comportment — can lead to major payoffs in our moral lives. Being mindful of such particulars can afford one a degree of self-regulation that many philosophers have sought to capture in the face of the situationist challenge. I conclude that, although situationism has often been depicted as a source of moral concern, it can also be seen as providing important resources for moral progress.

Situationism and Moral Philosophy

In psychology departments, talk of character traits, while ongoing, has been on the decline for some time. Research continues, but at an attenuated level and with less institutional support. This trend began in the mid 60s, when a number of important experiments seemed to demonstrate, in alarming fashion, how greatly individuals are influenced by their immediate situational contexts. In Stanley Milgram's infamous obedience studies, the vast majority of his subjects were willing to administer shocks of dangerous intensity to others screaming in pain and begging for relief, all at the gentle prodding of the experimenter

(Milgram 1963). During Philip Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment, the mock prison guards' treatment of the mock prisoners (who were fellow volunteers) rapidly devolved into extreme sadism, forcing the study to shut down just days into its original two-week schedule (Zimbardo et al. 1973). These experiments involved protracted interactions between individuals in highly controlled experimental settings, yet others demonstrated how behavior in everyday, routine circumstances can also be influenced by seemingly insignificant variables. In one (highly counterintuitive) experiment, conducted by Isen and Levin (1972), participants who found dimes in the return slots of public payphones were fourteen times more likely to help a passerby gather a dropped stack of papers than those who had not. In another famous experiment, Darley and Batson (1973) found that whether seminary students were willing to help a needy bystander on their way to a lecture hinged greatly on how pressed they were for time (in spite of the fact that many of them were on their way to lecture on the parable of the Good Samaritan!).

It seems hard to believe that finding a dime or being slightly pressed for time could impact behavior in such manifest ways. We normally think that if people behave charitably or deplorably it's because of who they are, the kinds of values they embrace, or the kind of character they possess. But such notions about the efficacy of character traits were rendered problematic by compelling experimental data throughout the 70s and 80s. This led to a strong swing towards *situationism*.[3] Situationism claims that morally significant behavior is influenced

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3. In a 2001 survey article for the *Annual Review of Psychology*, David Funder, a prominent personality psychologist, notes the lasting effects of the situationist critique: "Someday a comprehensive history will be written of the permanent damage to the infrastructure of personality psychology wreaked by the person-situation debate of the 1970s and 1980s. Even as enthusiasm for the substance of personality research has revived, the institutional consequences continue. Indeed, one reason for the trend … for so much personality research being done by investigators not affiliated with formal programs in personality may be that there are so few formal programs to be affiliated with. The graduate programs in personality psychology that were shrunken beyond recognition or even abolished during the 1970s and 1980s have not been revived." (Funder 2001, 213)

by situational factors to a far greater extent than we normally suppose. Think of the physicians discussed above: notwithstanding their commitment to practicing medicine impartially, their actual behavior was influenced by the small gifts they received from pharmaceutical companies.[4]

Yet while trait talk was losing steam in psychology, it was gaining momentum in philosophy as part of the revival of virtue ethics. For many philosophers, what motivated this revival during the last half of the 20th century was the psychological implausibility of agents' using general purpose moral rules, such as Kant's categorical imperative or Mill's principle of utility, as adequate guides to action. A major advantage of virtue theory was that it seemed to echo ordinary conceptions of moral conduct as stemming from character traits exemplifying virtues (*e.g.*, kindness) or vices (*e.g.*, vanity). Virtue ethicists underscored the importance of character, as opposed to rules and principles, to structure one's conduct, guide behavior on particular occasions, and ultimately lead to a flourishing life.[5] Yet such strong views concerning the efficacy of character were already being denounced as "fundamental errors" in experimental psychology.

Owen Flanagan addressed this gap between philosophical psychology and experimental psychology in his seminal *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism* (1991):

> The rhetoric in much contemporary virtue theory is of a decidedly, possibly excessively, confident and unqualified trait cast. Persons are courageous or just or temperate. She who possesses the virtue in question displays the right sort of response toward the right person at the right

time and in the right way. The vagaries of actual human psychology can easily disappear from view once this rarefied, unrealistic, and excessively flattering characterization is on center stage. (Flanagan 1991, 281)

Flanagan argued for a healthy dose of realism about traits, arguing that they may not be as robust or reliable as some theories of virtue might maintain. More recently, though, many other philosophers have weighed in on the issue, sometimes drawing far more skeptical conclusions. While some have come to the defense of Aristotelian virtue theory,[6] many others have seen the need for conceptual and practical revision. For example, in a number of provocatively titled articles (such as "No Character Or Personality" and "The Non Existence Of Character Traits") Gilbert Harman has argued that there is no good reason to think that people have any of the sorts of character traits we normally think they do (Harman 1999; 2000; 2003). John Doris and Stephen Stich, while abstaining from such categorical statements and admitting that no amount of empirical evidence could secure such a strong result, nonetheless maintain that, given the enormous situational variability of our behavior, virtue theory may be fundamentally misguided, robust virtue traits may not be possible for us, and so programs aimed at inculcating virtue may very well be futile (Doris & Stich 2005, 120). More recently, situationism has been seen as problematic for certain conceptions of free will (Nahmias 2007; Nelkin 2005), and to the more basic notion of what it means to be a person (Doris 2009).

In each of these areas, the focus of concern has been to evaluate the empirical adequacy of various substantive philosophical theories. Yet the situationist literature is of concern beyond its implications for philosophy. It seems genuinely troubling that one's own behavior could be shaped so decisively by situational factors, that the likelihood of meeting one's goals or instantiating one's values could hinge on the presence of dimes, the absence of time, or the gentle prodding of experimenters.

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4. For example, physicians who interact regularly with drug companies make far more frequent requests for those companies' new drugs to be added to hospital formularies (Chren & Landefeld 1994), and are more likely to prescribe newer and more costly medicines to their patients (Caudill et al. 1996). Wazana (2000) contains a helpful summary of 29 studies in this area. Despite believing that interactions with pharmaceuticals constitute a threat to physician autonomy generally, physicians routinely deny that they themselves are so threatened (McKinney et al. 1990).

5. A collection of seminal articles can be found in Crisp and Slote (1997).

6. See, for example, Annas (2003), Athanassoulis (2000), Kamtekar (2004), Kupperman (2001) and Sreenivasan (2002).

Beware Situational Influence!

If our behavior is captive to situational influence, what should we do about it? Many philosophers with varying agendas have all endorsed what I call a *seek/avoid* strategy. These philosophers recognize that situational influence is pervasive and weighty. However, they argue that it remains possible, when one is not caught up in novel or unusual situations, to choose the general types of situations one wants to encounter, and to structure one's life accordingly. Individuals should seek situations that strengthen or support virtuous behavior, and avoid situations that tend toward vice or moral failure.[7] In choosing *situations*, one chooses to embrace the *behavioral tendencies* they elicit.

For example, Maria Merritt suggests that we recognize the "sustaining social contribution" of situations to moral behavior as evidenced in the situationist literature and incorporate it into our moral theorizing (Merritt 2000). Her general line of argument is as follows. The fixation on character traits in the situationist literature has overlooked virtue theory's greatest asset — its emphasis on living a flourishing life. If it is possible to live a flourishing life, then virtue ethics remains a viable ethical ideal. The question is: How can one live a flourishing life? For Merritt, "motivational self-sufficiency of character" — the ability to make choices and judgments wholly unaffected by external circumstances — is not necessary. Instead, one should choose environments supporting virtue while avoiding those that do not. Granted, our virtues in such environments would be socially sustained as opposed to internally caused, but so what? If motivational self-sufficiency is rare or — what's worse — practically unattainable, then it is at least an open question whether one should pursue it.

Similar ideas have been expressed by Steven Samuels and William Casebeer (2005), who see situationism as highlighting the importance of proper training environments for moral education. Virtue takes time. A person seeking virtue should have the wherewithal to avoid negative situations and the wisdom to enter environments in which her virtues might flourish. By practicing virtue in selective environments, one might hope to develop more robust virtue traits over the long haul. In other words, Samuels and Casebeer argue that, so long as we can choose the sorts of situations we encounter, we are responsible for the sorts of character we have.

These philosophers have been interested in defending certain forms of virtue ethics by incorporating insights from situationism, yet the strategy they advocate is also embraced by critics of virtue theory. For example, John Doris has made his skepticism of character the basis for some sound advice: Don't overestimate your virtues; you'll disappoint yourself. Imagine that a colleague with whom you've had a long flirtation invites you to dinner to "keep you company" while your spouse is out of town. Imagine, further, that you value fidelity and believe yourself not prone to vice. Do you accept the invitation? Not if you take situationism seriously. Instead, "you avoid the dinner like the plague, because you know that you are not able to confidently predict your behavior in a problematic situation on the basis of your antecedent values" (Doris 2002, 147). Better to avoid the situation altogether rather than rely on your character to resist temptation once candles have been lit and wine poured. Gilbert Harman, an entrenched virtue skeptic, agrees that this is the right way to go.

> If you are trying not to give into temptation to drink alcohol, to smoke, or to eat caloric food, the best advice is not to try to develop "will-power" or "self-control". Instead, it is best to head [*sic*] the situationist slogan, "People! Places! Things!" Don't go to places where people drink! Do not carry cigarettes or a lighter and avoid people who smoke! Stay out of the kitchen! (Harman 2003, 91)[8]

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7. Some may wonder whether it is possible to exercise this kind of second order control over one's choice of activities. This concern has some bite. But the plausibility of the seek/avoid strategy cannot be ruled out *a priori*. See Merritt (2000), 372. More importantly, most of us are quite adept at choosing our situations anyway. That is, most of us naturally select for situations reflective of our values and beliefs. See Ross and Nisbett (1991), chapter 6.

8. Of course, one might wonder how avoiding bars and kitchens, and foregoing cigarettes and smokers, does not involve "will-power" and "self-control" (as Harman implies).

Avoiding situations that elicit bad behavior seems sensible indeed, and keeping company with the virtuous is a sure way to be virtuous. The strategy has much to recommend itself. But it has limitations. First, in order to avoid a certain type of situation, one needs be aware of its eliciting a particular pattern of behavior. This can be relatively straightforward for a narrow range of cases (such as those adduced by Harman above), yet many situations do not elicit behavior that is good or bad *simpliciter*. Second, certain relationships or situations, even if known to elicit undesirable behavior, may nonetheless be practically unavoidable. I may regularly grow irritable around my in-laws, but it may be impossible, given family politics and the desires of those I love, to steer clear of them for the rest of my life (no matter what benefits might result from doing so). Finally, while it is never a good idea to enter compromising situations blindly, one's ethical commitments may require exposing oneself to less than ideal situations and less than virtuous persons.

But notice that there may be even a deeper problem here. According to the situationists, one insignificant variable will often be enough to change a situation and thereby significantly affect the behavior of the individual involved. Situations are thus individuated along impossibly fine lines — being just a minute or two late, having just found a dime, the presence or absence of an individual or two, or any number of similarly trivial variables are enough to individuate one situation type from another and nudge one's behavior in one direction or another. Given how finely situations are individuated, how can one discriminate or discern precisely which situations are the ones to seek or avoid? The very lesson of situationism seems to be that such minor differences are routinely beyond our awareness. So, on the face of it, if the seek/avoid strategy advocates discriminating amongst situations, we are left wondering how this can be done on a practical level.[9]

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9. Sabini & Silver make a different though related point: "We believe that the advice the situationist gives — be sensitive to situational features that may affect your behavior in subtle ways — is in this regard useless, for the same reason that warnings about heightened terrorism threats are useless: they

Some may find these to be minor quibbles, and with increased attention we may become more adept at identifying the impacts that situations have on our behavior. Nonetheless, the restrictions for someone interested in maintaining virtue by selecting situations are considerable. But this is not where to press the issue. There is a more important limitation in this line of response.

Persons and Situations, Again

Recall that the seek/avoid strategy is animated by the thought that our behavior is tightly keyed to our situations — oftentimes, to the behavior of others in our situations. The strategy therefore emphasizes one path of influence: from situations to persons. It highlights how situations may be partly — perhaps greatly — responsible for how we behave. This is undoubtedly important. But a shift in perspective reveals that not only do situations affect our own behavior, but we return the favor. In other words, situations are not static entities unaffected by our presence; instead, we influence the situations we find ourselves in as much as they influence us. And just as we should mind how others are partly responsible for our own behavior, so too should we be mindful of how we are partly responsible for the behavior of others.

To see the contrast between these approaches, let's review a telling description of the seek/avoid strategy:

> I'm urging a certain redirection of our ethical attention. Rather than striving to develop characters that will determine our behavior in ways substantially independent of circumstance, we should invest more of our energies in attending to the features of our environment that influence behavioral outcomes. (Doris 2002, 146)

I, too, am urging a certain redirection of our ethical attention. But the details I emphasize are not details of external situations, but rather details of ourselves that we introduce into our situations. In other words,

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are unfocused; they warn people to be suspicious of everything! One can't be suspicious of everything!" (Sabini & Silver 2005, 561).

"attending to the features of our environment that influence behavioral outcomes" can just as well include attending to features our own persons. We are important variables of our interpersonal situations, tied up inexorably with the actions of others. Paul Wachtel has stated this succinctly:

> If each person's behavior is largely a function of the interpersonal situation in which he is engaged, then when two or more people interact, they are not only influenced by the behavior of the other (in the familiar sense of a response to a stimulus); each also influences the behavior of the other, by virtue of the stimulus properties of his own behavior. Person A responds to the stimulus properties of Person B, but Person B in turn is responsive to the behavior of Person A which he has in part determined … From such a systems orientation, the understanding of any one person's behavior in an interpersonal situation solely in terms of the stimuli presented to him gives only a partial and misleading picture. For to a very large extent, these stimuli are created by him. They are responses to his own behavior, events he has played a role in bringing about, rather than occurrences independent of who he is and over which he has no control. (Wachtel 1973, 330)

Wachtel's comments are only applicable to interpersonal situations, and specifically to the ways in which individuals in such situations affect one another's behavior. (I will be developing this idea in the next section of the paper.) However, it is important to note that individuals do lack control over many important factors that might affect their behavior, such as the state of the economy or concurrent weather patterns. Moreover, there are aspects of individuals that cannot be thought of as appropriate loci of individual control, such as a person's age, race, or sex. Thus, the range of factors one can control and manipulate in interpersonal situations will be limited. Yet within such constraints, and in spite of the fact that much of what impinges

on one's behavior may, in fact, be outside of one's control, much remains within it. And if one small variable can be enough to change a situation and alter the behavior of those involved (as the situationists claim), so too can a slight change in one's own behavior affect how one's situations unfold.[10]

When stated in such terms, this might seem unobjectionable, perhaps even obvious. However, many prevalent lay and philosophical theories of agency tend to vastly underestimate just how closely our behaviors are interconnected and mutually sustaining.[11] We tend to think that individuals act autonomously, according to their intentions, desires, and characters.[12] Situationism renders such notions untenable; whatever individualistic ideals we hold, we are not immune from external influence. This is the problem of situationism. Yet the promise of situationism lies in the very same fact: We are not immune from one another, and slight alterations in our own behavior can have real effects on others. Such thoughts may be overlooked in individualistic traditions, but there are traditions of thought — both lay and philosophical — that have long recognized the interconnectedness of social behavior.

For example, a significant amount of social psychological research has uncovered pervasive differences between how Westerners and East Asians conceptualize and understand the world. Nisbett et al. (2001) reviews this evidence and argues that whereas Westerners tend think in more analytic terms, classifying objects in distinct, separate

10. The general neglect of such considerations in the existing philosophical literature might be attributed to the way the issue has been framed: situations are often *contrasted* with persons, and the seek/avoid strategy depicts situations as separate entities which individuals "enter" or "evade".

11. For a philosophical treatment, see Taylor (1992). Of course, this claim is more plausible for some figures in the Western tradition (such as Descartes and Kant) than others (such as Plato and Aristotle).

12. This is a claim that arises from experimental psychology, where the phenomenon is often referred to as the "correspondence bias" or the "fundamental attribution error". For a review, see Gilbert & Malone (1985). Westerners seem more prone to the correspondence bias than are East Asians (see, *e.g.*, Lee et al. 1996; Miller 1984; Morris & Peng 1994).

categories, East Asians tend to think more holistically, attending to how objects relate to one another, situating them within broader contexts and trends. Of particular relevance are cultural differences in how people tend to think about individuality, agency, and entativity (*i.e.* where we draw boundaries between individuals). In line with the views of Nisbett et al., Markus and Kitayama (1991) argue that East Asians' concept of individuality is more relational and context-dependent, emphasizing the fundamental ties between individuals. Westerners, by contrast, do not assume such connectedness, and instead value independence from others.

We see similar differences in philosophical conceptions of individuality. Following Roger Ames (1994), let's distinguish two senses of 'individual'. On the one hand, 'individual' can refer to a single, indivisible, separate entity that is a member of a larger class or group by virtue of its having some essential property (or properties). Notions such as autonomous agency, independence, privacy, will, and freedom are often associated with this particular conception of individuality, common in Western (and especially American) cultures. This picture of a self-contained agent seems in tension with the situational sensitivity demonstrated in experimental social psychology. On the other hand, 'individual' can also be understood contextually, as a locus or focal point within a web of social relations. On this relational view, an individual, while unique, remains nested in and significantly determined by larger group structures, while also (and simultaneously) affecting the dynamics of these structures in turn. This notion, prevalent in East Asian (and especially Confucian) culture, is quite different from the idea of a private, individual, inscrutable "will" as a ground for action.[13] Instead, individuals and their groups are inseparable.

These differences may help explain why the findings of situationist psychology have been so remarkable and counterintuitive to many

13. For a further elaboration of the kind of personhood operative in this paper, see Wong (2006), who discusses how Confucian notions may be compatible with a certain understanding of autonomy, while being free of questionable assumptions about the exemption of individuals from the laws of nature.

philosophers steeped in the Western tradition.[14] If our lay and philosophical theories depict us as free, private, and autonomous agents, it should not be surprising that situationism has been seen as a threat. However, there are traditions — such as the Confucian tradition — that have long recognized the interconnectedness of human behavior, and can therefore serve as a fertile resource for theorizing about how we might further our own responses to the facts of situationism.

Social Signaling

The idea that our behavior is highly interconnected with others is pervasive in classical Confucian thought in general, and the *Analects* of Confucius in particular.[15] Given that we are social creatures intimately connected to one another, the text shows a great deal of preoccupation with relatively minute matters of conduct, such as one's posture, countenance, tone of voice, choice of words, ceremonial attire, and overall comportment, as these were thought to affect how others behave and how interpersonal situations unfold.[16]

There were compelling pragmatic reasons further motivating this attentiveness to detail. Confucius and his followers sought social reform by persuading those in power to enact policies to benefit the common people. This was no mean feat. Benevolent governance was not the norm during Confucius's time (ca. 6th century BCE). What is now China was then a number of independent kingdoms vying for territorial expansion. Governmental policies focused on increasing the population, conscripting armies, and developing technologies to increase agricultural output and strengthen the state's coffers. Rulers

14. There are exceptions. See, for example, Annas (2003).

15. An important recent elucidation of this theme in early Confucianism, incorporating insights from newly unearthed texts, can be found in Csikszentmihalyi (2004), especially pp.178–192.

16. For an excellent overview of situationist strains in early Confucian thought, see Hutton (2006). Hutton marshals considerable evidence suggesting that several classical thinkers were preoccupied by the impact of situational variables on behavior (such as music, styles of clothing, and other ritual gestures), and incorporated situationist insights into their ethical and political theories.

were happy to entertain the counsel of learned men, but not those who, like the reforming Confucians, emphasized policies benefiting the common people. Persuading those wielding power to adopt policies orthogonal to their own interests was risky business, and the signals a reformer would give off in his presentation would be crucial to effecting change.

Confucius appealed directly to the importance of such "signals"—such as one's expressiveness or demeanor (*rong* 容 / *mao* 貌), countenance (*yan* 顏 / *se* 色), and tone of voice (*ciqi* 辭氣)—while exhorting his students to pursue the ethical ideal of becoming a *junzi* or gentleman.

> 16.10—Confucius said, "The gentleman focuses on nine things: when looking, he focuses on seeing clearly; when listening, he focuses on being discerning; in his countenance (*se* 色), he focuses on being amiable; in his demeanor (*mao* 貌), he focuses on being reverent; in his speech, he focuses on being dutiful; in his actions, he focuses on being respectful; when in doubt, he focuses on asking questions; when angry, he focuses on potential negative fallout; and when presented with the opportunity for profit, he focuses upon what is right."[17]

In fact all of book ten of the *Analects* is devoted to detailed observations of Confucius's overt behavioral mannerisms:

> 10.25—When he saw someone in mourning dress, he invariably assumed a solemn expression (*mao* 貌)—even if the person were well known to him. When he saw someone wearing a full ceremonial cap or someone blind, he would take on a reverential countenance (*se* 色)—even if the person were an acquaintance.

Master Zeng, a disciple of Confucius, expresses the rationale behind such attention to one's overt signals on his deathbed:

17. Translations are my own, following the text in Lau (1992)

> 8.4—There are three things in our *dao* [teaching] that a gentleman values most: by altering his demeanor (容貌) he avoids violence and arrogance; by rectifying his countenance (顏色) he welcomes trustworthiness; through his words and tone of voice (辭氣) he avoids vulgarity and impropriety.[18]

Here we see a direct connection between features of one's scrutable self and the behavior of others. The gentleman is able to effect changes in others by attending to aspects of his own comportment.

From a contemporary perspective, this attention to one's own appearance and presentation might seem incredibly vain. At best, we might excuse it as a relic of the noble class to which Confucius belonged, matters of etiquette and not morality. At worst, it might connote a noxious linkage of virtue with external attractiveness that we would (rightly) find morally repugnant. At the very least, it all seems beside the point. Not only does individual style of this sort seem to have almost nothing to do with morality, it also seems, at a more fundamental level, to be an inappropriate site of moral blame.[19] But style counts, and understanding the ethics of the Analects requires that one go beyond the character issues in the text and attend to these stylistic considerations. Insofar as it affects others, attending to how one comports and expresses oneself should be as much within the purview of moral concern as what one does.[20]

> 14.42—Zilu asked about the gentleman. The Master said, "He cultivates himself in order to be respectful" "Is that all?" "He cultivates himself in order to comfort others." "Is that all?" "He cultivates himself in order to comfort all people."

In the context of the *Analects*, cultivation must be understood as both

18. In some recent work, Nancy Sherman has emphasized the importance of such factors in early Stoic ethics. See, for example, Sherman (2005) and Sherman (2007), Chapter Three.

19. I borrow these thoughts from Kupperman (2002, 48).

20. My contrasting what one does with how one does it is similar, in these respects, to Robert Audi's distinction between *duties of matter* and *duties of manner*. See Audi (2004, 178–181).

involving one's character as well as details of one's overt mannerisms; the latter were thought paramount to the practice of virtue and to effecting real changes to one's situations.

Indeed, the ability to control situational contexts and influence others through non-coercive means was associated with a potent source of moral power or moral charisma, often associated with the virtue of *de* (德). Individuals who cultivated themselves and attended to the aesthetics of their conduct were seen as able to influence others in profound ways; at the limit, others would be literally "transformed" by their presence.

> 12.19 — Ji Kangzi asked Confucius about governing, saying, "If I were to kill those who lacked guidance in order to move closer to those who have guidance — how would that be?" Confucius answered, "In governing what need is there for killing? Just desire the good and the common people will be good too. The power (*de* 德) of a gentleman is like the wind, the power (*de* 德) of a petty person is like the grass — when the wind moves over the grass, the grass is sure to bend."

> 9.14 – The master expressed a desire to go and live among the Nine Yi Barbarian tribes. Someone asked him, "How could you bear with their uncouthness?" The Master replied, "If a gentleman were to dwell among them, what uncouthness would there be?"

These are striking claims, but we can recognize the central message running throughout the passages cited above: influencing how situations unfold begins with minding the cues arising from one's person.

Indeed the effects of such minor changes in signaling on the behavior of others have been measured. Consider, for example, the "Affective Communication Test" developed by Howard Friedman and colleagues to measure the overall expressiveness — or "charisma" — of individuals (Friedman et al. 1980). The test asks participants to rate

themselves on a scale of 1 to 9 as to how much they agree with statements such as the following:

> "When I hear good dance music, I can hardly keep still."

> "I can easily express emotion over the telephone."

> "I often touch friends during conversations."

> "I am shy among strangers."

> "I am terrible at pantomime as in games like charades."

> "I show that I like someone by hugging or touching that person."

Friedman and Riggio (1981) administered this test of overall expressiveness to participants and assigned them scores based on their answers. They then placed one high-scoring participant in a room with two low-scoring participants, ostensibly to wait for the "real" experiment to follow; in fact, the short waiting phase *was* the experiment. These three individuals were asked not to speak to one another. Nonetheless, self-report measures of mood recorded before and after this brief session indicated that the two low-scoring (*i. e.*, unexpressive) individuals were influenced by the presence of the single high-scoring (*i. e.*, expressive) individual, picking up her mood. (The effect didn't run the other way.)

This transfer of mood was accomplished without any verbal communication; it was as though the expressive individual could, through her mere presence, directly affect those in her immediate surroundings (a very *de*-like quality).[21] Yet slight changes in verbal cues can also shape behavior in significant ways. For example, the way we label sites of potential conflict can influence whether or not others will end up acting in cooperative ways. In a study by Liberman et al (2004),

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21. This is in line with the substantial literature on emotional contagion. Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson outline a three stage process on how this proceeds: (1) in interpersonal contexts, people automatically and continuously mimic others, synchronizing their facial expressions, mannerisms, tone of voice, posture, etc.; (2) through a feedback mechanism, such mimicry elicits the relevant emotional states in the individuals at hand; and (3) emotions are thus transmitted and "caught" by other individuals. See Hatfield et al. (1994).

participants were first rated by their peers (fellow dorm residents) on how cooperative or uncooperative they were, and then asked to play a prisoners-dilemma type coordination game requiring cooperation among players in order to maximize payoff. They found that previous reputation had little predictive power on whether or not individuals would cooperate. What did have great influence was whether they named the game the "Wall Street" game or the "Community" game: two-thirds of participants cooperated in the Community Game, whereas only one-third cooperated in the Wall Street Game. In other words, the name of the game exerted tremendous influence on the players' behavior in a way that few would expect if they were simply given character or reputational descriptions of the individuals involved.

The effects go far beyond verbal content to other small details of one's comportment. For example, verbal tone can sometimes outstrip verbal content in affecting how others interpret verbal expressions (Argyle et al. 1971); a slightly negative tone of voice can significantly shift how others judge the friendliness of one's statements, even when the content of those statements are judged as polite (Laplante & Ambady 2003). In game-theoretic situations with real financial stakes, smiling can positively affect levels of trust among strangers, leading to increased cooperation (Scharlemann et al. 2001). Other subtle cues, such as winks and handshakes, can enable individuals to trust one another and coordinate their efforts to maximize payoffs while pursuing riskier strategies (Manzini et al. 2009).

In sum, our choice of words, emotional expressions, mannerisms, tone of voice, posture — each of these variables can trigger behavior patterns in others, to which we respond in kind, in a continual process of impact and adjustment. Attention to such details and their effects on others would make it more likely that any and all situations one entered would be amenable to agreeable outcomes. I suggest that Confucius's preoccupation with details of comportment reflects his awareness of how one's presence affects others. By proactively introducing signals that foster an environment amenable to cooperation, one can enhance the probabilities of positive outcomes emerging. And even if

it is often not possible to predict how others will behave in any particular situation — something along the lines of "P will do x" — one may nonetheless have recourse to a particular kind of *conditional* prediction — "P will do x if I do y" (Morton 2003). The particular moves one makes and particular variables one introduces can render others more or less predictable, both over shorter and longer periods of time. Of course, the effects of other situational variables might still be in play; the claim here is not that other situational effects can be defeated through such mindfulness. However, they may be mitigated or preempted if one chooses to mind one's signals carefully.

Objection: Am I Underestimating Persons?

Some might find this all overly dramatic. Of course minding one's manners can help bring individuals together. And yes, it may be true that subtleties of one's own behavior may affect one's immediate situational contexts. But humans are rational creatures. They can overlook minor irritations that arise owing to careless words or untoward expressions. The approach here, some may claim, makes too much of these minor effects. When trouble brews people can address it in reasonable ways. What's more, individuals all value self-expression and the freedom to behave how they please, expecting others to respect their choices and preferences. On this view, calls to "mind manners" or "mind one's impact on others" seem onerous, reflective of less mature conceptions of what it means to be a moral person.

While I cannot here entertain a protracted discussion of the role of rationality in regulating interpersonal conduct, I wish to show that such a response, while not without merit, is indicative of the kind of response given by the many physicians who deny that little gifts from pharmaceuticals affect their practices. To focus discussion, I shall concentrate on the phenomenon of first impressions.

When we meet others, we form impressions of them, and they tend to stick. This automatic tendency motivates numerous social practices, such as grooming before a first date or rehearsing before an important presentation. It can be unfair, of course, to judge or evaluate persons

based on their behavior on any one particular occasion, as the behavior may not be representative. Nonetheless, first impressions are easy to form and difficult to overcome. What's more, there is a pronounced asymmetry between the impact of negative first impressions versus positive ones (Fiske 1980). We are quicker both to form and to recall negative impressions, and are also more likely to do so. We also tend to be more confident about negative impressions (Carlston 1980), take less time to arrive at them (Lingle & Ostrom 1979), and require less information to be convinced of them (Yzerbyt & Leyens 1991) relative to positive impressions. Once a negative character evaluation is made, we tend to seal it away from revision or interference. Importantly, we are content to stop searching for alternative, rational explanations of negative behavior — especially any situational explanations — once we've arrived at character explanations (Ybarra 2001). Character evaluations are a priority whenever we come upon unfamiliar individuals; when first encounters are bad, we take note.

And here's the rub: even though we are often blind to the situational variables affecting others' behavior, we are highly motivated to root them out for ourselves, to advert to them in explaining our own miscues. Because the effects of such variables are more available to us,[22] we come to resent others for not taking them into account in assessing our actions, even though this is precisely what we do when roles are reversed. This self-serving bias leads us to feel bitter toward those who fail to properly contextualize their judgments of us (Bradley 1978).

Once again, some may find this all overly studied. Even granting such tendencies, it remains an open question whether or not any particular impression is appropriate or accurate. Moreover, some individuals may believe themselves extremely adept at forming accurate impressions of others, finding their impressions routinely confirmed by subsequent data: the initially cold and distant colleague turns out

to be just as cold and distant in the end, and those they warm up to tend not to disappoint. Thus, it may be unnecessary to overcome first impressions, even if they are based on a small sample size. In what remains, I want to show that such thoughts can be deceptive, for there are compelling reasons to believe that we often (and unwittingly) produce the very evidence that corroborates our initial judgments.

There are at least two psychological phenomena that might play a role in this. The first, commonly known as the *confirmation bias*, is our general tendency to seek or interpret evidence in ways that confirm our previously held hypotheses (Nickerson 1998). Bad first impressions render individuals more susceptible to noticing bad subsequent behavior; good subsequent behavior, by contrast, is overlooked or discounted. This bias can make us believe (inaccurately) that evidence abounds confirming our initial impressions, when in fact we simply have a tendency to notice such evidence to a greater extent. The second phenomenon is often called *behavioral confirmation* or *self-fulfilling prophecies*, and occurs when we treat others in ways reflective of our preexisting beliefs about them. By treating a person as though our beliefs about her were true, we can cause the person to act in ways that conform to our preexisting beliefs.[23] For example, we might think someone rude, and then treat her accordingly. The target individual picks up on this, feels resentful, and reciprocates in kind, thus confirming our initial hypothesis. Yet the initial hypothesis might have been based on inaccurate stereotypes, or on a single previous interaction. What's more, we are often ignorant of our own causal role in this process. Hamilton and Trolier, while discussing the impact of stereotypes on our interpretations of others, put the matter into sharp relief: "Given the perceiver's awareness of the confirmatory nature of the target's behavior and lack of awareness of his or her own role in producing it, it would seem particularly difficult to convince the perceiver that his or her stereotypic beliefs are wrong" (Hamilton et al. 1985, 150).

In other words, attempts to ameliorate bad first impressions

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22. By saying that such explanations are more available to us, I do not mean that we have access to explanations that others do not. The results of research on self-examination are not very encouraging as to our virtues here. For an overview, see Timothy Wilson's aptly titled *Strangers to Ourselves* (2002). Instead, we are more motivated and more prone to seeking out these explanations.

23. For an overview, see Chen and Bargh (1997).

through rational reflection can often be futile, owing to (a) our tendency to seek or interpret evidence in ways that confirm our previously held hypotheses, thus making us believe them to be true; and (b) our complicity in producing the corroborating evidence itself. Put succinctly, our initial impressions might be inapt in spite of the fact that they turn out be true.

None of this goes to denying that we *can* discount the impact of negative impressions through rational reflection, especially if we are prompted or demanded to do so. But any effort along these lines will run against the psychological tendencies just noted. We tend to close off situational explanations once we've concluded that the person has a bad character, and will be regularly biased into noticing — or even producing — evidence supporting these conclusions. (Of course, just the opposite is true when we switch perspectives. We expect others to discount our minor transgressions and remain open to disconfirming evidence, and when they fail to do so we grow resentful.) And given these tendencies, it is not obvious which side we should err on. We might throw caution to the winds and embrace norms of self-expression and freedom, trusting that any misunderstandings can be easily ameliorated by subsequent discussion. Or we might recognize that calls to be rational are themselves psychologically onerous for those who believe their assessments well founded (as we tend to think), and instead try to obviate the need for such mediation from the get-go by being more mindful of our impact on others. [24]

24. A number of studies suggest that even entrenched racial stereotype activation can be moderated or ameliorated depending on contextual cues. For example, white subjects' implicit attitudes toward blacks can vary depending on context; when blacks are depicted in positive situations (*e.g.*, a family barbecue or a church setting), implicit negative stereotypes are mitigated (Wittenbrink et al. 2001). Still other studies show that both implicit and controlled stereotypes of white, black, and Asian faces can be reversed if they appear in different roles, such as student or athlete, lawyer or prisoner, churchgoer or factory worker (Barden et al. 2004). Such studies suggest that context and presentation can serve to moderate racial biases — both controlled and automatic.

Conclusion

The core of situationism is correct — people are not trapped by aspects of their personalities, doomed to behave according to recalcitrant character traits, come what may. Instead, individuals are highly malleable. In different situations, with subtly different prompts, we can expect individuals to behave in very different ways. We hardly notice it, but oftentimes a kind smile from a friend, a playful wink from a stranger, or a meaningful handshake from a supportive colleague can completely change our attitudes. Such minor acts can have great effects. If we mind them, we can foster a form of *ethical bootstrapping* — that is, we can prompt or lift one another toward our joint moral ends. If situationism is true, then whether any individual will be able to meet her ethical aims on any particular occasion will hinge on the actions and manners of others in her presence, which in turn will hinge on her own. In being mindful of the interconnectedness of our behavior, we not only affect how others react to us, but also thereby affect the kinds of reactions we face with in turn. The bootstrapping is mutual.

So the promise of situationism is that we do, indeed, have the power to shape our relationships with others in positive ways. After all, people can have flourishing or accommodating moral relationships in spite of real differences in their avowed moral commitments, and deleterious or rancorous moral relationships in spite of substantive agreement on big-ticket moral items. In pluralistic societies such as ours, where we expect clashes of norms to occur, it is vital to uncover the conditions propitious to agreement or accommodation not just at a theoretical level but a practical level as well. This should begin with what we have most control over: our manners.[25]

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