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## Consistent egoists and situation managers: two problems for situationism

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According to philosophical “situationism”, psychological evidence shows that human action is typically best explained by the influence of situational factors and not by “global” and robust character traits of the agent. As a practical implication of their view, situationists recommend that efforts in moral education be shifted from character development to situation management. Much of the discussion has focused on whether global conceptions of virtue and character, and in particular Aristotelian virtue ethics, can be defended against the situationist challenge. After several rounds of debate, both sides claim victory, and they seem to have reached a stalemate. In this paper, I refocus the debate on the arguments offered in support of situationism itself. I argue that two serious problems have so far gone unnoticed in the literature. First, the argument in support of situationism is unsound. It is based on evidence that agents’ morally relevant behavior reliably covaries with morally irrelevant situational variables. Using the example of egoism, I show that this evidence does not warrant the situationist inference because the evidence permits a plausible alternative interpretation. Second, I argue that the situationists’ advocacy of situation management is at odds with their core thesis because situation management requires exactly the type of agency they reject as unrealistic.

**Keywords:** situationism; moral psychology; character; practical reason; situation management

### 1. Introduction

The core of “situationism”, as a position in philosophical moral psychology, is the view that human moral behavior is typically best explained by reference to situational circumstance rather than to the agent’s character or convictions. According to situationists, empirical evidence shows that what accounts for morally relevant behavior is typically not the moral dispositions and beliefs of individual agents, but, rather, “*depersonalized* response tendencies, which function largely independently of actors’ evaluative commitments” (Merritt, Doris, and Harman 2010, 370, emphasis original; see also Doris 2002; Harman 1999, 2000). These response tendencies are “activated” by seemingly insignificant or morally irrelevant features of a situation, and they are “not only indifferent to personal values, but also resistant to intentional direction” or “without intentional direction” (Merritt et al. 2010, 370, 371). The situationists’ point is not to deny that agents have relatively stable moral beliefs,

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attitudes, and values (Doris 2002, 87). Rather, they deny that these are typically the causes of agents' behavior.<sup>1</sup>

Situationists agree in denying the widespread existence of "global" character traits that are stable and "robust", that is, broad traits, such as honesty or courage, that reliably manifest themselves in the form of behavior that is consistent across a variety of trait-relevant situations and in spite of contrary pressures.<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Harman has argued that "there is no empirical support for the existence of character traits" at all (Harman 1999, 330; 2000). John Doris and Peter Vranas defend a more moderate position, arguing that while the evidence does not support the existence of "global" traits, there is empirical support for the existence of "local" or "fragmentary" character traits that are tied to certain situations, such as honesty-towards-friends or sailing-in-rough-weather-with-one's-friends-courage (Doris 2002, 115; Vranas 2005, 30). But situationists all maintain that the number of agents with global character traits is at best very small. Doris calls substantial behavioral consistency of the kind that is evidence of global traits "rare enough to count as abnormal" (Doris 2002, 65); Vranas allows for a slightly larger minority (2005).

Their use of qualifiers such as "largely" and "typically" should not obscure the fact that, by their own account, the situationists' core thesis is radically at odds with common conceptions of human behavior.<sup>3</sup> Humans are said to have a strong tendency to attribute morally relevant behavior to allegedly global character traits and to the moral convictions of agents, and the situationist thesis is that doing so is typically unwarranted. The further lesson, for moral philosophers in particular, is that "conceptions of practical rationality . . . are unlikely to play a central role in an empirically sophisticated account of moral cognition and behavior" (Merritt et al. 2010, 370).

As a practical implication of their core thesis, situationists recommend that efforts to improve our behavior should focus on situation management strategies rather than character development. This should prompt a shift in the focus of moral education:

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 outcome. (Doris 2002, 146)

Few people will deny that some form of situation management is good advice. The radicality of the situationists' claim lies in their contention that striving to develop good (global) character traits is futile – or even worse, insofar as it distracts us from what really does make a positive difference, namely situation management.

The situationists' claims have sparked a heated and still expanding debate in moral psychology and ethics. Although the passages quoted show that their core thesis has a much wider scope, because it concerns the role of rationality in action more broadly, their arguments have been directed mainly against Aristotelian virtue ethics and its conception of character.<sup>4</sup> As a result, much of the ensuing debate has focused on the question whether situationism really does undermine Aristotelianism. Situationists take the empirical evidence to show that character traits of the kind the Aristotelians uphold as virtues hardly exist. Opponents of situationism have formulated a number of replies to the situationist challenge. Situationists in turn, however, find these defenses unconvincing. After several rounds of debate, both sides claim that their position remains unscathed.<sup>5</sup>

In this essay, I aim to move beyond this impasse and shift the focus of the discussion away from the debate over the situationist challenge as such and onto the structure of the arguments in support of situationism itself. There are two crucial weaknesses in the argument that have so far gone unnoticed: the argument for the core thesis includes an invalid

inference, and the situationists' advocacy of "situation management" to improve moral behavior involves them in self-contradiction.

It is important to examine the strength of the situationists' argument as such, instead of merely responding to their criticisms or showing – important though this is – that there are alternative ways of looking at the empirical facts. For situationists will regard any rejoinders in support of the existence of global character as failures to take seriously the allegedly widespread phenomenon of behavioral inconsistency. In this paper, I circumvent the current frontlines and show that the situationists' own argument is seriously flawed at a more fundamental level.

I first examine the situationist argument in support of the core thesis and show that it includes an invalid inference (Sections 2 and 3). I then show that the empirical evidence indeed permits a different interpretation (Section 4). I subsequently argue that the type of agency involved in the recommended situation management cannot be accounted for in terms of the situationists' core thesis. Situationists implicitly attribute a crucial role to reason-motivated agency (Section 5). I conclude that situationism fails to make the case against the widespread existence of global character traits and against the significant role of reason in action. This conclusion does not diminish the great moral significance of empirical psychology, however (Section 6).

## 2. Egoism and the evidence of behavioral consistency

Situationists base their core thesis on evidence from empirical psychology. They take the evidence to indicate that the widespread human tendency to attribute morally relevant behavior to agents' global and robust character traits is misguided. Frequently invoked evidence includes the famous experiments conducted by Stanley Milgram in the 1960s, which showed that a large majority of ordinary test subjects were willing to give severely painful or even fatal electric shocks to a person whom they believed to be a fellow test subject, at the polite request of an experimenter (Milgram 1974). Yet, researchers also found very high percentages of test subjects who helped someone who appeared to be electrocuted, when doing so posed no danger to themselves (Clark and Word 1974). Other evidence shows that when the sun is shining, people are more inclined to display helping behavior than when it is cloudy (Cunningham 1979), and that pleasant smells also significantly increase people's willingness to help (Baron 1997; Isen and Levin 1972), whereas noise and hurrying decrease it (Darley and Batson 1973, Mathews and Canon 1975). If our willingness to help or hurt varies reliably with morally irrelevant situational variables, so the situationist reasoning goes, then global character traits apparently do not play much of a role in determining our morally relevant behavior. But how *exactly* do situationists argue for this claim?

It would be a mistake to read the situationist point as depending simply on the observation that moral behavior covaries with variations in the experimental set-up. After all, if behavior turns out to vary with the situation, this could in principle reflect the agent's *appropriate* and reason-based sensitivity to *relevant* differences between situations, and if so, the covariation as such would not support situationism. The situationist point is, more precisely, that the agents' morally relevant behavior (say, helping or not helping others in need) reliably covaries with morally *irrelevant* differences in the experimental set-up. They take this to show that the variation in behavior cannot be explained in terms of the agents' reasons for action or in terms of global character traits.

When situationists take this step, they use the following criterion. When they judge that the evidence indicates that behavior is governed by situational circumstance, they do so on the basis of a comparison between the *actual* behavior of test subjects and the behavior the

latter would be *expected* to manifest if they were to act on the basis of global character traits; and, importantly, they formulate the *expected* behavior in terms of the agents' *moral values* (or "personal values", "evaluative commitments", "normative endorsements" and related expressions). In other words, the situationists argue that insubstantial or morally insignificant situational influences produce behavior that runs entirely counter to the behavior one would *expect* of agents, given the *moral values* that the agents endorse. As Merritt, Doris, and Harman put it in a representative passage, referring to Milgram's experiments:

Given the widely endorsed moral prohibition on harming innocents against their will, one *expects* [the test subjects to stop shocking the learner]. But . . . a clear majority somehow failed to pull the rational pieces together and treat the harmfulness of their continued obedience as a decisive reason to stop. (Merritt et al. 2010, 365–366, emphasis added)

In arguing along such lines, situationists assume that if agents endorse a moral value (e.g. honesty, courage) and if global, stable, and robust character traits exist, agents will act in accordance with the value whenever this is appropriate. Conversely, the situationists' basic argument is that agents' morally relevant behavior turns out to be neither consistently good nor consistently bad; that it covaries with morally extraneous features of situations rather than with agents' moral (or immoral) commitments; and that this behavior should therefore be regarded as best explained by situational factors, rather than by agents' character or convictions.

But here is the problem: because they formulate the *expected* behavior in terms of agents' *moral* commitments, situationists overlook the possibility that agents have global traits that are associated with behavior that is neither consistently morally good nor consistently morally bad. One example of such a trait is egoism. A person can consistently act egoistically without her observable behavior being consistently morally good or bad (in terms of common conceptions of normative ethics – I say more about ethical egoists below). Whether she helps or harms someone, for example, will depend on whether she considers doing so to be in her interest. To judge whether a person acts *egoistically*, therefore, one should not examine whether her behavior is consistent across situations that differ in *morally* relevant or irrelevant respects, but whether her behavior is consistent across situations that differ in *egoism*-relevant or irrelevant respects. If we broaden the range of possibilities in this way, however, much of the experimental evidence on which situationists rely no longer offers straightforward evidence of inconsistency. Evidence that people's behavior is neither consistently morally good nor consistently morally bad does not suffice to show that people do not have global traits. The situationists' inference is based on a false alternative, namely, that people's behavior should be explained *either* in terms of their (im)moral convictions *or* by reference to situational variables. Situationists overlook a broad range of possible reasons and global character traits that would lead agents to act *consistently* without their observable behavior being *consistently morally good or bad*.

Before turning, in the next section, to the textual evidence for my claim that the situationist argument really does have this problematic structure, let me clarify the precise nature of the problem. Here is an example:

*Egoistic Politician:*

Suppose a politician endorses helping others in need but nevertheless reliably acts egoistically. Whether she has a guilty conscience or not, let us suppose she believes that she should be more beneficent. As it is, she sometimes does help others, namely, when this is in line with her egoism. For example, in the presence of cameras, she may help a person in need, from a desire to appear generous or caring. She expects to have a better chance of winning the next

election when the news depicts her acting beneficently. But when there are no cameras, she does not help, because she regards doing so not to be in her interest.

Given the structure of the argument for the situationist core thesis, a situationist would interpret the behavioral evidence in this case as follows:

*Situationist analysis:*

She morally endorses helping others in need, but when there are cameras, she helps, and when there are no cameras, she does not help. Therefore, her behavior is inconsistent with the behavior that one would *expect* on the basis of her moral commitments, and it is not best explained by her conviction that she ought to help or by a global, stable, and robust trait of beneficence. Rather, her behavior reliably varies with a (beneficence-irrelevant) feature of the situation (the presence or absence of cameras), and this situational variable is what best explains her behavior. She is *not a beneficent person*. At most, she appears to have the “local”, fragmented and situation-relative trait of *beneficence-in-front-of-cameras*.

Situationists formulate agents’ expected behavior in terms of the moral norms they endorse and assume that when these expectations are not met and behavior covaries with morally irrelevant situational variables, the agents’ behavior is best explained in terms of these situational variables.

Given the situationists’ criterion (phrased in terms of the agents’ moral values), ordinary humans would have to be close to moral *saints* to avoid being regarded as situation-driven (as acting “without intentional direction”, on the basis of “depersonalized response tendencies” activated by the situation). The only other option situationists consider is that of morally “bad” commitments, such as those of agents who value hurting others and who would meet expectations by acting sadistically.

The egoistic politician, however, is neither saint nor sadist, nor is she best described as situation-driven. Her behavior varies reliably with the situation, to be sure, but there is a reasons-based explanation why. She reliably and consistently acts from self-interest, and her acting from self-interest explains, in terms of *reasons* on her part, *why* she helps when cameras are present and *why* she does not help when they are not. Most of all, she wants to further her own interests, and she believes that her interests are best served by appearing to be beneficent. To put it in terms of global character traits: She is an egoist, and it shows. In her case, the presence or absence of cameras may well be *morally* irrelevant (namely, in the sense of being irrelevant to the question of whether she ought to help the person in need), but it is not *egoism*-irrelevant.

The consistency of her behavior remains invisible from the situationist standpoint. In the case of the egoistic politician, situationists would register the behavioral pattern (if camera, then beneficence; if no camera, then no beneficence) without being able to explain the pattern itself.

I do not mean to suggest that the few pieces of behavioral evidence stipulated in the example of the egoistic politician would be sufficient to ascribe the global trait of egoism to a real person: much more evidence would be needed, gathered from a wider variety of settings. Nor do I claim that people (or politicians) typically act egoistically, or that egoists are always fully consistent in their behavior. My point is to show why the situationists’ argument for their core thesis is flawed, and to explain why their thesis does not have the empirical plausibility they claim for it. In cases such as that of the egoistic politician, the evidence that an agent endorses beneficence but only acts beneficently depending on beneficence-irrelevant situational variables does, in fact, allow an explanation in terms of global traits, contrary to the situationists’ central claim.

To put the point more generally: If we allow for the empirical possibility that people act for reasons other than their moral convictions – that is, as a matter of description, not of what it would be *most* rational for them to do, all things considered – we may suddenly explain much *seemingly* inconsistent behavior as *consistent* across situations after all, and as evidence of global traits. This type of behavioral consistency applies in the case of forms of moral failure that do not involve malice, such as cowardice or moral indolence, in addition to egoism. Persons with such traits fall short of a moral ideal (and hence do not act in a way that is consistently good) without pursuing harm to others for its own sake (and hence without acting in a way that is consistently bad). Such agents benefit or harm others depending on whether this serves some end *other* than the benefit or harm as such (for example, their safety, their comfort, or the satisfaction of their private interests). For the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary to provide a precise determination of the complete set of such traits; it is enough to show that such a set exists. Insofar as they are conceived as forms of moral failure, such traits may be called (non-malicious) *vices*,<sup>6</sup> but it is not necessary for my argument that they be conceived as vices. For example, some people consider egoism to be a virtue. Psychologists and philosophers who examine whether the evidence reveals behavioral patterns do not have to introduce substantive moral commitments in this regard; it is enough for them to broaden the set of possible patterns they consider.

It might be objected, at this point, that the egoistic politician in the example does not *really* believe that she ought to help, given her non-beneficent behavior when cameras are absent. The reason I cast her as someone who endorses beneficence is that situationists themselves focus on cases in which people endorse a moral value but fail to act accordingly. Those who deny that the egoistic politician “really” endorses beneficence, given her behavior, may cast her as a *wholehearted* egoist and the situationists’ argument for their core thesis would remain equally flawed. The behavioral evidence would remain exactly the same and the situationist would be equally unjustified in inferring that the politician’s behavior is inconsistent and best explained by the presence or absence of cameras. Her wholehearted egoism would still explain why she helps when there are cameras and does not help when there are none.

In sum, the empirical evidence that agents’ morally relevant behavior varies reliably with morally irrelevant situational variables is not sufficient to warrant the inference that agents’ behavior is typically inconsistent, that they typically do not act for reasons, and that they typically have no global character traits. There is an invalid inference at the heart of the argument that supports the situationists’ core thesis. In arguing for this claim, I am developing a different – and more fundamental – criticism than authors who offer alternative explanations of specific experimental findings, such as the explanation of the Milgram experiments in terms of the subjects’ fear of embarrassment (Sabini and Silver 2005) or their pusillanimity (Badhwar 2009). Such alternative explanations are consistent with the argument I develop here, but my analysis concerns the deeper issue of the situationists’ *argument structure*. Furthermore, in response to alternative explanations of specific test subjects’ behavior, situationists can always assert that these apply at best to a limited set of cases. The situational factors are so disparate and so often unconscious or morally insignificant, situationists claim, that it is not possible to provide a general explanation in terms of specific reasons. And indeed, Merritt, Doris, and Harman reply to Sabini and Silber as follows:

These explanations [in terms of reasons] suppose that the actor acted on what he took (or on reflection would take) to be a reason, but a large body of empirical work indicates that this may relatively seldom be the case. (Merritt et al. 2010, 369–370)

Thus, in response to alternative explanations of specific pieces of evidence, situationists can assert that their own analysis applies “often” or “typically”, and that the alternative explanation applies “rarely” or “relatively seldom”. By contrast, if, as I have argued, there is a general and fundamental flaw in their most basic inference, then this reply is no longer available to them.

### 3. The argument for the core situationist thesis

To show, with more textual detail, that the analysis in the previous section really captures the structure of the argument for the situationists’ core thesis, let me zoom in on their argumentation concerning the Milgram experiments. The situationists explicitly regard these as key evidence in support of their thesis and they discuss them on many occasions. The experiments are well known, but, for the sake of completeness, I nevertheless introduce them before discussing the situationists’ use of them.

The experiments Milgram describes in his book, *Obedience to Authority* (1974), were designed to examine the conditions under which and the extent to which ordinary people would obey an experimenter who requested that they administer increasingly severe electric shocks to a likeable man whom they believed to be just another test subject. The latter was designated the “learner”, and he was in fact collaborating in the experiment. The test subjects were asked to shock him whenever he gave an incorrect answer on a word-pair memory test, purportedly to see whether punishment enhanced learning. They were also told that the shocks could be painful but were not dangerous. Contrary to most people’s expectations, including Milgram’s own, almost all test subjects were willing to administer extremely painful electric shocks. A two-thirds majority went so far as to administer shocks of potentially lethal strength, where the levers were marked “danger: severe shock” (at 375 volt) or “XXX” (at 435 and 450 volt). The test subjects did so despite hearing the screams of the confederate victim, and (at the higher shock levels) despite no longer hearing any response; despite the victim’s explicit and repeated withdrawal of his consent (starting at 150 volt), and despite the fact (in some versions of the experiment) that the learner had said beforehand that he worried about the shocks because he had a heart condition. And they did so despite the fact that nothing seemed to hinge on their performance for themselves: they were paid in advance, there were no sanctions against quitting, and they could simply have walked out the door. Many of them hesitated, worried, sweated, contemplated quitting, and consulted the experimenter, but when he requested that they continue, most often they eventually did. Milgram ran 18 variations of the set-up (having two experimenters who disagreed; having instructions given by telephone, moving the experiment off campus, and so on), and determined that the crucial factor in compliance was the authority attributed to the experimenter. Somehow, with a majority of test subjects, his authority outweighed anything the learner could do, say, or scream.

Situationists use the term “moral dissociation” for the divergence between the morally relevant behavior of subjects and the moral values or norms that these subjects endorse (or would endorse) upon reflection (Merritt et al. 2010, 363, note 16). To show that morally arbitrary situational factors (and the depersonalized response tendencies they trigger) are responsible for the behavior, they proceed to consider two possibilities: *either* the Milgram subjects endorse harming others for its own sake *or* they do not act on the basis of reasons and their behavior is best explained by the influence of situational circumstances.

The situationists assume that, to make their case for the second option, they need to show that most people do not aim to inflict harm on others for its own sake (Merritt et al. 2010, 364). In theory, after all, Milgram’s experimental results might mean that,



hidden under the veneer of social conventions, most humans are wholehearted sadists. In that case, their behavior would still be attributable to their (immoral) values or global character traits rather than to features of the situation, because it matches what one would expect sadists to do. Situationists reject this explanation, however. Doris claims that the experiment “does not suggest that Milgram had stumbled onto an aberrant pocket of sadists”; rather, it highlights “the power of the situation” (Doris 2002, 42; see also the rhetorical question in Harman 1999, 322). In their joint paper, Merritt, Doris, and Harman point to the “free choice” permutation of the Milgram experiment for further support. Here, Milgram allowed test subjects to set the shock level wherever they liked, and when given that option, all test subjects chose to give only very light shocks (Merritt et al. 2010, 364–365). In other words, situationists claim that it is *not* that the agents are sadistic (endorse inflicting harm as such), *but* that “relevant features of the situation” cause the behavior (Harman 1999, 322). According to Doris, “his [viz., Milgram’s] experiments are powerful evidence for situationism”, because they show “how apparently noncoercive situational factors may induce destructive behavior despite the apparent presence of contrary evaluative and dispositional structures” (Doris 2002, 39). This is precisely the argumentative structure discussed in the previous section. The assumption is that behavior should be explained either in terms of the agents’ (moral or immoral) values, or, if their behavior does not match one’s expectations (given these values), in terms of situational variables (and the response tendencies they trigger).

Situationists’ interpretation of other empirical evidence follows the same pattern. In much of Doris’ and Harman’s work, the argument has the form of an inference to the best explanation: the alleged inconsistency of human behavior is said to be best explained by reference to the hypothesis that behavior is governed by situational circumstance (Doris 2002, 26, 63; Harman 1999; see Merritt et al. 2010, 357, note 5, and Doris 2005, 633, note 4, where this argument structure is mentioned explicitly). But there are also versions of the argument for the core thesis that aim to be deductively valid. For example, Peter Vranas defends the following version:

- [1] There are many situations in each of which most people (would) behave deplorably.
  - [2] There are many situations in each of which most people (would) behave admirably.
- Thus: [C] Most people (would) behave deplorably in many (i.e., in an open list of actual or counterfactual) situations and admirably in many other situations. (Vranas 2005, 4)

Vranas regards this conclusion as equivalent to the following formulation of his conclusion in terms of “fragmentation”:

- [C] Most (i.e., the majority of) people are fragmented. (Vranas 2005, 2)

“Fragmentation”, on Vranas’s account, entails “indeterminacy”, which means that a person is neither good, nor bad, nor intermediate, but rather, “has no character status” (16; see also Vranas 2009, 215).

In their joint essay, Merritt, Doris, and Harman formulate their argument as a *modus tollens*, as follows (here with a focus on the robustness of traits):

- (1) If behavior is typically ordered by robust traits, systematic observation will reveal pervasive behavioral consistency.
- (2) Systematic observation does *not* reveal pervasive behavioral consistency.
- (3) Behavior is *not* typically ordered by robust traits. (Merritt et al. 2010, 357–358; identical in Doris 2005, 633)

They justify the second premise on the basis of findings in social psychology, including the Milgram study (357).

In each of these versions of the argument, the crucial assumption is that stable, robust, *global trait-based consistency* requires observable behavior that is either *consistently good* (admirable, compassionate, etc.) or *consistently bad* (deplorable, sadistic, etc.). As I showed in the previous section, however, this assumption is unwarranted because there are further possibilities. Agents may endorse certain moral principles or values, yet stably give priority to a different consideration, such as their private interest. Perhaps such agents' behavior is not *fully* rational all things considered; but it is not therefore "*without* intentional direction", governed by "depersonalized response tendencies" triggered by trait-irrelevant situational factors.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it is also possible for agents to be *wholehearted* in their pursuit of, say, their own interests or their safety, and when that is the case, their behavior may again be consistent without being consistently good or consistently bad in terms of the moral values situationists use as a standard.

#### 4. Another look at the evidence

If one allows for the possibility of non-malicious vices and the wholehearted pursuit of non-mainstream moral values (for example, those endorsed by ethical egoism), the behavioral evidence appears in a new light. This can again be illustrated by reference to Milgram's findings. The explanation of the "obedient" test subjects' behavior in terms of situational factors remains a possibility. But this explanation is now one possibility among many others that should be considered: For example, one subject may be too cowardly to defy the experimenter's request, for fear of rebuke or embarrassment; another may outsource the moral responsibility for his own decisions to the experimenter, out of moral indolence; a third may craft excuses by blaming the learner for giving the wrong answers. Most people consider these reasons to be bad reasons for continuing to shock the victim, morally speaking, and this may explain the agony and intense inner conflict visibly experienced by many of Milgram's subjects. But one can no longer rule out that their behavior is the manifestation of stable and robust global character traits – for example, cowardice, indolence, or a disposition to shift blame to others – for these are all traits that do not manifest themselves in the form of observable behavior that is either consistently morally good or consistently morally bad. The coward may do the morally right thing when no courage is required; the indolent may do so when it is easy, and so on.

If one approaches the evidence with these possibilities in mind, the Milgram results are compatible with experimental evidence that shows extremely high helping rates under non-dangerous and unambiguous conditions, such as in the "electrocution" experiment by Clark and Word (1974).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the latter study shows that helping rates drop when helping is perceived to be dangerous or when the situation is ambiguous. This pattern is exactly what one would *expect* in a population in which the value of beneficence is widely endorsed but in which many agents have one or more (non-malicious) vices. After all, danger and ambiguity would give the coward and the indolent grounds for not helping.

Whether and to what extent explanations in terms of non-malicious vices (or non-mainstream virtues) are in fact warranted in specific cases can be established only on the basis of sufficient evidence. In any given case, working out the correct explanation may be complicated. One cannot know on the basis of a single observation of helping-in-front-of-cameras whether a politician's behavior betrays egoism,<sup>9</sup> and the same point holds in the case of the Milgram subjects. Longitudinal studies involving the same subjects would be required, but such studies are virtually nonexistent (Webber 2006). In the case of some subjects, egoism,

indolence, or cowardice may provide the best explanation; in the case of others, appeal to “depersonalized response tendencies” might be more appropriate. I do not mean to deny that the latter exist, but I have argued that it does not follow *from the behavioral evidence* presented by the situationists that morally relevant behavior is *typically* the result of situational factors activating such tendencies.

At this point, situationists may insist that the different rates of obedience in the different permutations of the Milgram study do constitute evidence in favor of the situationist explanation. Obedience rates varied greatly depending on whether the instructions were given by telephone or in person, whether the instructions came from one experimenter or from two who disagreed with each other, or whether the experiment was conducted at Yale University or at a run-down office building off campus, for example. If the morally relevant core elements of the case are the same (namely, a subject being asked to deliver painful and possibly lethal shocks to an innocent learner), and if the differences between the scenarios are actually irrelevant to the moral quandary that the subjects face, then – situationists might insist – only the situational differences explain the different obedience rates.

Non-malicious vices and non-mainstream virtues may also provide an explanation for the variability of obedience rates between scenarios, however. If fear of embarrassment is motivating you (Sabini and Silver 2005), it is all too understandable – psychologically speaking – that you would be more obedient in front of a live experimenter than in response to a voice through the telephone, and more obedient in front of a Yale University experimenter than one without a prestigious affiliation. If you tend to outsource moral responsibility for difficult decisions to others, it is much easier to do so when there is one experimenter with authority than when there are two experimenters who disagree with each other. And so on. Similarly, in terms of the earlier example: If you are an egoistic politician looking to be elected, you are more likely to be beneficent in front of cameras than when they are absent, other things being equal; and you are also more likely to show beneficence in front of the cameras of national news stations than those from an unimportant foreign country; and with more rather than fewer cameras, and so on. These situational variables may be irrelevant to the *moral* question of whether you ought to help the person in need. But the cameras are highly relevant to the question whether it serves your *interest* to do so. In other words, situational variables may be morally irrelevant while being highly relevant to a range of global character traits.

We need not assume – in fact, it strikes me as highly unlikely – that there is *one* reason or trait, such as fear of embarrassment or pusillanimity, that covers the behavior of most or all individuals in a specific experiment. Our explanations of human behavior probably have to be more fine-grained than that assumption allows, but this is an empirical issue that I do not pursue here (see Bates, unpublished manuscript, for more discussion of the relevant evidence in relation to a range of vices).

I have again mostly focused on the example of agents who endorse certain moral standards that they fail to meet. As was the case above, I did this to capture the cases that situationists discuss when they point out the divergence between agents’ values and their behavior. The argument again extends, however, to the behavior of *wholehearted* egoists and others whose values differ from those situationists take to be most widely shared. The ethical egoist, for example, will disagree as to which behavior is “admirable” or “deplorable” in the first place (to use Vranas’s terms in the argument mentioned in the previous section).

At the end of this discussion of the argument for the core thesis of situationism, the reader may wonder what to make, then, of the empirical psychological studies that provide evidence of the influence of seemingly insignificant elements of the situation on

human behavior: the smell of cookies, the weather, mood effects, priming effects, and more. These studies provide very important information, and their moral significance should not be underestimated. But even if it seems impossible to explain agents' behavior in terms of reasons or global traits, in such cases, these studies do not amount to proof of the core thesis of situationism; they support only a much weaker claim. They show that human behavior is sometimes or perhaps even *often* – a deliberately vague term – influenced by factors outside the agent's conscious control. They do not show that it is “typically” influenced by such factors, that global trait-based consistency is “rare enough to count as abnormal”, or that reason plays virtually no role in our morally relevant behavior.

The situationist argument for these stronger claims – that is, for the core thesis of situationism – depends on the premise that evidence reveals the absence of the required kind of behavioral consistency across the board. This premise in turn depends on the invalid inference from studies such as the Milgram experiments, studies which situationists regard as key evidence in support of their thesis but which may actually permit an explanation of the observed behavior in terms of reasons and global character traits.

### 5. Who takes remedial measures?

A second overlooked difficulty with the situationist position emerges when we examine what is involved in situation management.<sup>10</sup> This is the situationists' alternative to the traditional emphasis, in moral education and self-improvement, on developing or improving moral character. The problem is that the conception of agency implicit in this recommendation is at odds with the situationists' core thesis.

Situationists have regularly expressed optimism that their theory provides the key to improving human behavior. Doris, for example, argues that we should try to “avoid . . . ethically dangerous circumstances” and “seek near occasions for happier behaviors – situations conducive to ethically desirable conduct” (Doris 2002, 147), that we have a duty to attend to the features in situations that influence our behavior and to engage in “skilled self-manipulation”. He claims that this “enhances normative competence” and leads to “more responsible agency” (Doris 2002, 146–149). As an example, Doris mentions a situation in which you receive an invitation from a colleague with whom you have had a long flirtation, to have dinner while your spouse is out of town. You, however, sincerely value fidelity. Doris writes that:

if you take the lessons of situationism to heart, 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)

In their joint essay, Merritt, Doris, and Harman discuss empirical research showing that mechanisms of self-control and self-monitoring can be strengthened through training and deliberate self-improvement. The individual cannot go it alone: supportive social contexts are also necessary, as are institutional and legal structures (Merritt 2000; Merritt et al. 2010). Mark Alfano has argued that we should not merely choose or avoid given situations, but also produce or create situational contexts with an eye to their likely effect on our own behavior and that of others (Alfano 2013a, 2013b).

When we flesh out what situation management *involves*, however, we see that its advocates are implicitly committed to the ideal of a stable and robust *global disposition* to manage one's situations. Furthermore, taking the proposed remedial measures involves a subject's *reason-governed* adoption of the principle of managing one's situations, a

principle that is to become effective in the agent's behavior across a range of different situations. Both ideas are at odds with the situationist core thesis discussed in the previous sections.

For the sake of argument, I assume that situation management is a good idea and that it works; there is indeed a large amount of evidence of its effectiveness (e.g. Alfano 2013a, 2013b). My point is not directed against the idea of situation management as such, but against the way in which situationists use this idea. I argue that they cannot account, in terms of their own core thesis, for the type of agency involved in the activity of situation management they recommend. This is the second problem for situationism.

Postponing for the moment the question of whether situation management requires a constant effort or whether it is restricted to the cool hour of reflection, consider first what it means to engage in it, and consider further the features of the *managing* self that are implied.<sup>11</sup> These features include at least the following:<sup>12</sup>

- (1) *Moral consciousness and moral judgment*: the situationists must assume there is a first-personal singular subject (*I*) who uses a moral criterion and has a working consciousness of moral obligation. After all, if I am to take the remedial measures and manage my situations for the reason the situationists mention, I must believe it to be morally important to improve my behavioral patterns.<sup>13</sup>
- (2) *Moral motivation on the basis of moral insight*: furthermore, and even more importantly, situationists must presuppose that my *insight* into the moral benefit and empirical feasibility of situation management can or does *motivate* me to carry out the remedial program. (Presumably, the theoretical conclusions of the situationists' arguments are to become motivationally efficacious in their readership and beyond.) Even if the point of situation management is to outsource much of the motivational burden of morally relevant action to my social and institutional environment, the process of *getting my environment set up* in this way requires a deliberate effort. *This*, situationists are assuming, I can be motivated to do on the basis of my insight into the normative necessity of doing so. In short, in the case of the *managing* self, situationists presuppose that it is psychologically realistic to allow for rationally motivated moral action.
- (3) *A stable, robust, and global disposition to manage one's situations*: the recommended attitude of the situation manager has all the features of a stable, robust, and global disposition. It is conceived as an active and long-lasting commitment to engage in certain forms of situation-managing behavior under the relevant circumstances, a stable commitment that is grounded in inner moral convictions and that manifests itself in outward behavioral patterns. The *managing* self stably *attends to* the features in situations that influence one's own behavior, *aims* to avoid morally dangerous circumstances, and *seeks* to establish behavioral contexts that are conducive to the desired behavior; and this shows itself in outward behavioral patterns. Moreover, this disposition ranges over a wide variety of situations. Even if situation management concerns an agent's behavior in specific "local" contexts (as situationists are likely to argue), this does not make the *managing as such* a merely local affair. When the managing subject selects which local circumstances to target, the agent does so from a broader moral perspective. Moreover, the disposition to manage one's situations has to span at least several different situational contexts. It has to span at least the situational contexts of *informing* oneself about psychological mechanisms, of *selecting* local situations to target, *implementing* empirically informed strategies for behavioral improvement,

*monitoring* one's subsequent behavior, and *providing feedback* regarding the need for further efforts – and this is only its bare minimum range. Finally, this disposition is unavoidably conceived as “robust” (or “motivationally self-sufficient”, Merritt 2000, 374). The *managing self* as such cannot rely on the support of moral scaffolding, because its task is to *establish* a morally supportive situational context in the first place.

In other words, the assumptions implicit in the situationists' recommendation of situation management add up to the ideal of a certain type of moral agent, held up as a feasible ideal. This is the ideal of a global, robust, and stable disposition to manage one's situations in the morally appropriate way; a disposition, moreover, that is grounded in moral commitments and manifests itself in observable behavior (that is, in the actual management of one's situations).

I am not suggesting that this set of assumptions places situationists in the Aristotelian camp or that it commits them to one or more Aristotelian virtues; rather, my point is that it betrays a tension within situationism itself. The recommended situation management involves the ideal of a stable, robust, global, and reason-based disposition (namely, the disposition to manage one's situations), although the core situationist thesis is that such global dispositions rarely exist and do not qualify as a feasible ideal for the general population.

Importantly, the inconsistency does not lie in the fact that agents are expected to improve their behavior as a *result* of situation management. Rather, the inconsistency lies in the fact that the very remedial measures themselves require, on the part of the *managing* agent, processes that are governed by the actor's evaluative commitments (to use the very terms the situationists use to describe the position they reject, quoted above). The *managing* self cannot yet rely on the results that situation management is supposed to produce.

Moreover, within the situationist framework, the proposal of remedial measures faces a serious bootstrapping problem. In order to remedy the alleged problem that our behavior typically occurs “without intentional direction”, our *managing* self is supposed to intentionally direct our behavior (namely, to manage our situations by intentionally selecting specific strategies). In order to remedy the alleged problem that our behavior does not conform to our moral norms, our *managing* self is supposed to make our behavior conform to our moral norms (namely, by managing the right kind of situations in the right way).

Faced with the critique that their proposed remedy contradicts their own diagnosis, situationists could respond in two ways. They could reply that their recommendation of remedial measures is restricted to a specific group of people, or that it is restricted to a specific form or domain of behavior. They are unlikely to choose the first route. They cannot restrict the ideal of the situation manager to a moral elite with the ability to organize the social world such that it becomes morally safer for the rest of us (for example, by paternalistically establishing a social and institutional environment set up to produce morally desirable behavior in others). The situationists' own standard of broad psychological realism, in light of which they criticize Aristotelianism, does not allow them to posit a moral ideal that only few people can realize.

Situationists will more likely reply that situation management differs from other forms of action. In describing the practice of situation management, they write that the “proactive formulation of personal goals and policies, explicitly targeting situational factors pre-identified as problematic, may on the occasion of action diminish the influence of unwelcome automatic tendencies” (Merritt et al. 2010, 388; cf. Alfano 2013b, 254). The locution “on the occasion of action” suggests a distinction between situation management and

“action” – as if situation management is not a form of action – but we may interpret the passage to mean that management is a form of *second-order* action. If so, however, it is no less “action” for that. “*Attending* to situations”, “*targeting* problematic situational factors”, or “*formulating* personal goals and policies” are all forms of *action* by any reasonable definition of the term. If action is typically governed by situational circumstance, then so is situation management.

But situationists might insist that things are not as bad as I make them sound because situation management is limited to proactive activity during the cool hour of reflection (the “cooler decision contexts” mentioned in Doris 2002, 148). This would not make the problem go away, but situationists might claim that it would at least confine it.

They do not provide much argument or evidence to show that it is or can be so confined, however. For one thing, it is hard to see how they could even exempt the agent in the “cool hour” from being “governed by the situation”, given their core thesis. For another, “ethically dangerous circumstances” may occur at any time in our daily lives and in ways that are impossible to foresee, as situationists themselves never tire of pointing out. This makes it hard to see how we can anticipate in the cool hour exactly which situations to seek or avoid. Who would prepare specifically to refuse enticing-dinner-invitations-from-attractive-colleagues-while-one’s-spouse-is-out-of-town? Assuming the thought of doing so occurs to one, and given that situationists highlight psychological evidence regarding the influence of such factors as the smell of cookies or the amount of sunshine, who really knows whether in one’s own case one should train differently for invitations coming in when it is sunny as compared to when it is cloudy, when one’s kitchen smells of cookies or when it reeks of garbage, or when one has just found or lost a dime? And who knows how these and infinitely many other, largely unconscious and morally insignificant situational features interact with one another to influence one’s response to a specific invitation? Yet, when one receives a “dangerous” phone call from the attractive colleague in Doris’ example, one needs to assess the risks correctly and muster the necessary strength to decline the invitation right then and there. Is this decision context indeed “cool”, as Doris implies by mentioning it as an example, or is it actually pretty “hot” already? My point here is not to deny that proactive situation management has positive effects (it certainly does), nor to assert that situation management is more complicated than situationists allow (situationists know it is complex and say so, Doris 2002, 148). My point, rather, is that relegating situation management to a “cool hour” separate from the “occasion of action” seems impossible and that some form of situation management *also* has to take place “on the occasion of action”. It would seem that the *managing* self should be on duty at all times – even if only in the background – attending to the relevant features of situations as they develop. Therefore, the confinement strategy faces serious difficulties.

There is another, more fundamental problem with the “cool hour” reply, however. If the agent improves her behavior as a result of careful situation management, then her later behavior is no longer *just* due to “the power of the situation” and “without intentional direction”. For then her behavior is most fundamentally the result of her intentionally selecting one situation (dinner alone) rather than another (romantic dinner with her flirtatious colleague). Therefore, even if we could restrict situation management to cooler contexts, a situationist should credit the desired behavior that results from these efforts (fidelity), at least in part, to the reason-motivated activities of the situation-managing agent, and not just to “the power of the situation” in which the agent acts.

Situationists, therefore, face a dilemma. They should either frankly acknowledge that situation management involves motivation on the basis of moral insight and a global

disposition to manage one's action contexts in the morally appropriate way, or they should give up their optimism regarding remedial measures. Abandoning this optimism is not really an option, because they cite empirical studies showing that situation management has positive effects. Distancing themselves from the psychological evidence would therefore involve distancing themselves from the psychological realism they advocate. But if they frankly acknowledge the crucial importance of the reason-motivated effort to cause one's behavior to become morally better (namely, of the agent's intentionally *managing* her situational contexts in order to cause her subsequent behavior to improve),<sup>14</sup> they are forced to attribute a *central* role to practical reason in their own empirically informed philosophical account of moral agency.

## 6. Conclusion

Situationists argue that morally relevant behavior is typically best explained in terms of situational factors beyond the agent's awareness and control, that "depersonalized response tendencies" account for most of human moral behavior, and that conceptions of practical rationality play at most a marginal role in empirically sophisticated accounts of moral cognition and behavior. I have argued that their argument for this thesis fails, and that the thesis lacks the empirical plausibility situationists claim for it. Furthermore, even situationists themselves implicitly attribute a central role to reason-motivated action when they recommend situation management.

These conclusions do not diminish the importance of empirical psychology for moral theory and practice. There is clear evidence that some of our morally relevant behavior *is* influenced by morally irrelevant situational factors. But situationists argue for a much stronger thesis: They claim that human moral behavior is *typically* best explained in terms of such factors. The rejection of situationism is fully compatible with the endorsement of the more moderate (and much less newsworthy) thesis that human moral behavior is *sometimes* or even *often* influenced by situational factors such as the weather or the smell of cookies, and that morality requires us to counteract their influence in some cases and to use it in others.

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## Notes

1. Situationists do not usually claim that situations *determine* behavior in a *direct* sense. Rather, they conceive of situational features as 'triggering' or 'activating' subliminal response



tendencies in individuals, thus leading to behavior mediately. Different individuals have different response tendencies, and as a result, there may be behavioral differences among individuals acting in similar situations (Doris 2002, 25–26; Merritt et al. 2010, 370).

2. Situationists also criticize the assumption that virtues are ‘evaluatively integrated’, arguing that agents instead tend to have dispositions that are inconsistent with each other and with the norms agents endorse. I do not focus on evaluative integration because my argument concerns the prior and more fundamental issue of the existence of global character traits as such.
3. Because situationism is at odds with common assumptions regarding human behavior, some authors describe the core of situationism as the thesis that ‘the behavior of a given person in a given situation depends *more* on characteristics of the situation and *less* on characteristics of the person *than people typically assume*’ (Vranas 2005, 3, emphasis added). If the core thesis is described in terms of a contrast with what people typically assume, however, this makes the content of the position unstable or its truth dependent on how many people believe it.
4. For helpful reviews of the background and history of the debate, see Alfano (2013a); Sarkissian (2010); Upton (2009a).
5. Some opponents of situationism have pointed out that the evidence presented by situationists does not show that broad character traits do not exist; virtue may be rare, or the evidence may be of the wrong kind (cf. Miller 2003, 2009, 2010; Snow 2010; Wielenberg 2006). Others have criticized the situationists’ conception of character (Annas 2005; Badhwar 2009; Kamtekar 2004; Kristjánsson 2008; Kupperman 2001; Sreenivasan 2002; Upton 2009b; Webber 2006, 2007). Critics of situationism have also suggested specific traits that could explain the empirical evidence (Badhwar 2009; Sabini and Silver 2005). Finally, some have criticized the distinction between ‘person’ and ‘situation’ (Sarkissian 2010, 5–12). Critics of situationism often regard these rebuttals as sufficient to put the matter to rest, but situationists disagree. From their point of view, there are rejoinders to these criticisms. For example, in response to the assertion that virtue may indeed simply be rare, situationists have asserted that their claim is ‘not that people fail standards for good conduct, but that people can be induced to do so with such ease’ (Merritt et al. 2010, 357). Furthermore, when opponents of situationism argue that what matters for character are one’s *inner* values and traits, even if these do not translate into observable behavior, situationists tend to regard this as an admission of the behavioral irrelevance of character. Doris (2002) anticipates many objections; most recently and extensively, Alfano (2013a, ch. 3; 2013b, 243–252). Both sides claim that they can successfully defend their position against their opponents. On the debate, see also Prinz (2009, 120–127).
6. Non-malicious vices should not be confused with what Christian Miller calls ‘mixed traits’ (Miller 2013, 2014). Miller considers the *traits themselves* as ‘evaluatively mixed’. By contrast, I consider non-malicious vices, *qua* forms of moral failure, to have only negative valence. The *observable behavior* that stems from such vices may sometimes happen to harmonize with moral demands, but that does not mean that the trait that *underlies* the behavior is itself partially morally good. In such cases, the moral desirability of the resulting behavior is entirely accidental to the underlying trait, as the example of the egoistic politician illustrates.
7. In line with the argument for their core thesis, situationists have a tendency to equate vice with malice, and to conceive of vice in terms of the endorsement of different values. Doris only briefly considers non-malicious vices, merely to ask whether cowardly behavior could in principle be the expression of an agent’s values. His answer, tellingly, is simply affirmative: ‘perhaps the coward values safety more than honor, loyalty, and dignity’ (Doris 2002, 20). On Doris’ construal, the coward does not *fail* to live up to a standard of courage (not his own, at least); he is someone who greatly values safety. This reduces talk of vice to normative disagreement: what one person regards as a vice (cowardice) is what another person regards as a virtue (putting safety first). I regard this conception of vice as implausible but do not discuss it further, because the argument in this essay does not depend on it. Incidentally, Christian Miller similarly mentions as a criterion for possessing a vice that one not feel distress when acting in accordance with the vice, and that one not believe doing so is wrong (Miller 2013, 303, 312–313). On this understanding of vice, again, one cannot attribute vices to oneself (at least not without being inconsistent or confused).
8. Another study sometimes mentioned in this context shows that many subjects were willing to pursue a thief of a purse they had agreed to watch on behalf of some else (Moriarty 1975). This is a more complex case, however, because of the element of previous agreement.

9. For a detailed and more general exposition of this point, from an Aristotelian perspective, see Kristjánsson (2008).
10. I focus on situation management, although situationists sometimes also recommend *self*-management or *self*-manipulation. My analysis in this section applies equally to these other recommendations, as well as to Alfano's recommendation that we use 'moral technology' to cause ourselves and others to behave 'in accordance with' moral virtues, even if not 'from' virtues (Alfano 2013a).
11. 'Self' here refers to whatever the situationists regard as the subject of situation management.
12. I here mention only the presuppositions that are relevant to the argument that follows. The full list is longer and includes other assumptions that sit uneasily with the situationist position. For example, it also includes the assumption of effective self-monitoring (I must not engage in too much rationalization or confabulation), even though situationists claim that our cognitive processes are also 'highly susceptible to situational variation' (Merritt et al. 2010, 359).
13. Furthermore, the selection of situation management strategies should satisfy moral constraints. If I believe that my avoiding temptation requires your being locked up, it is not therefore morally permissible for me to lock you up. *Which* moral criterion is the right one is a separate question, however. Situationists explicitly abstract from that question, however, and this is legitimate within the scope of their argument.
14. This seems to be the position taken in Merritt et al. (2010, 388).

### Notes on contributor

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