Virtue Ethics and Situationism:
The Person-Situation Debate Examined

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Abstract

Aristotle's virtue ethics relies heavily on both a characterological moral psychology and the concept of practical wisdom. However, in recent years psychological experiments have led to debates on the influence of our character traits on our behavior, as well as on the possibility of practical wisdom as active deliberation. According to these experiments, we behave differently than expected on the basis of the Aristotelian view on character, and most of the cognitive processes that influence our behavior are substantially automatic and unreflective. Based on the results of these experiments, some philosophers, known as situationists, have argued that our behavior is influenced mostly by situational factors and not by our character. This debate between virtue ethicists on the one hand, and situationists on the other hand, is also known as the person-situation debate. My aim in this thesis is to examine the person-situation debate and explore the consequences of the psychological account of the situationists for virtue ethics. I will discuss three positions: the virtue ethical position, the situationists' position, and a reconciliatory position. After discussing these three positions I will examine the consequences of the person-situation debate for virtue ethics.

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Introduction

Tim walks out of a store with a new suit he just bought for his big date tonight. When he gets to his car, he starts to question the choice he made: did he really look good in this suit or was his judgment clouded by the compliments of the saleswoman? He only has four hours before the date and he really does not want to make a fool of himself: he wants to look good. He decides to get a friend's opinion. While driving, he thinks of two friends he can ask for advice: Jane or Olivia. Jane is the type of girl who says what she thinks without considering the feelings of others. Olivia is much more considerate: she would try to sugarcoat her opinion as much as possible, but she would not lie. Tim decides he will ask Olivia; she will tell him whether he has made the right choice without harming his confidence too much.

In the example above, Tim uses his knowledge of the character traits of his friends to make a decision. He predicts, based on their character traits, how his friends will behave, and he would be surprised if one of his friends acted 'out of character'. Most of us, like Tim, use our understanding of character this way. We trust someone if we know him to be trustworthy, and we generally try to avoid someone if we know him to be cruel. Our understanding of character therefore plays a central role in how we evaluate people's behavior and how we value people. This is why we try to develop the right kind of characters when we raise our children; we want to develop honest, polite, and courageous people rather than dishonest, disrespectful cowards.

The concept of character and character development has been around since Plato wrote his *Republic* (Kraut 2014), but it is Aristotle who is best known for his character-based ethics, also known as *virtue ethics*. For Aristotle, the question of how we *ought* to act is directly related to *what kind of person we should be*. No rule can be given that is applicable in every situation we come across, but we *can* figure out what kind of person we should be. Therefore, Aristotle developed a detailed account of moral development in which character plays a central role. He argues that people with the right character and the right understanding will perform morally desirable acts. This *virtuous* person knows how, why, and when to act and will lead a happy life, or a life of *excellence*.

Thus, Aristotle's virtue ethics relies heavily on a moral psychology with a focus on character and understanding. Only a person with the right kind of character traits and a rightly developed moral cognition can become virtuous. The right character traits are known as virtues: morally desirable dispositions to act right.

Examples of these virtues are courage, temperance, and justice. These character traits are dispositions that are 'stable': they influence or determine our behavior in every relevant situation. If someone is honest, he is honest whenever he can be. We trust this to be true and, based on this knowledge, we predict how someone will act in a given situation.

Psychological experiments, however, have led to debates on the influence of our character traits on our behavior. Results from these experiments seem to suggest that we behave differently than what we would expect based on the dispositional or Aristotelian view on character. For example, the results of one experiment showed that seminary students who were in a hurry walked right past someone who was in need of help, while students who were not in a hurry were more likely to help (Darley and Batson 1973). Results from psychological experiments like these and others (for example Milgram 1963; Hartshorne and May 1928) seem to suggest that our belief that our character is the main influence on our behavior, and that our understanding of someone's character can help us predict how he will act, is false.

Some philosophers, also known as situationists, have concluded from these results that that the Aristotelian or virtue ethical view on character—a set of stable (character) dispositions that are the main influence on our behavior and that can be used to predict how people will act in certain moral situations—can be challenged by empirical evidence. They argue for a position known as situationism, which entails that not our character traits, but (morally irrelevant) external situational factors are the main influence on our behavior. According to the situationists, the experiment mentioned above illustrates that not the student's character traits, but the external situational factor of being in a hurry, is the main influence on his behavior. Situational factors can differ greatly, but are the same in that they are circumstantial factors and influences. Examples are: odor, pressure from an authority figure, the influence of other people's behavior, and even finding a dime. In other words, situationists have argued that we have overestimated the influence of our character on our behavior. According to situationists, if we want to predict people's behavior in a situation, we are safer to predict that he or she will do what people typically do than to rely on character traits (Doris 1998, 507).

The debate between the (Aristotelian) virtue ethicists and academics, who support a view of character and dispositions as the main influence on our behavior, and the situationists, who deny this dispositional influence and emphasize the influence of external situational factors, is known as the person-situation debate.

History of the Person-Situation Debate

The person-situation debate started in psychology at the beginning of the twentieth century with various empirical studies. In 1928, for example, Hugh Hartshorne and Mark May tested for honesty and deception traits among over 8000 children. Their conclusion was that honesty was not a trait that is cross-situational (apparent across different situations), rather it is situation specific (see Epstein and O'Brien 1985). Examples of other experiments are Stanley Milgram's 'obedience experiment', in which he tested how far people were willing to follow an experimenter's orders of shocking an innocent person before disobeying (Milgram 1963), John Darley and Daniel Batson's 'Good Samaritan experiment' (1973), in which they tested the influence of hurrying on the helping behavior of seminar students, and Alice Isen and Paula Levin's 'dime finding experiment', in which the effect of a person's "positive affective state on his or her subsequent helpfulness to others" (Isen and Levin 1972) was measured, among others. All of the conclusions from these experiments seem to *at least* argue against a widespread possession of stable (Aristotelian) character traits that determine our behavior. *At most*, these results can be interpreted as evidence against the very existence of Aristotelian virtues or character traits (Kristjánsson 2008, 59). The most important psychological work on situationism, however, is Walter Mischel's book, *Personality and Assessment* (1968), in which he claims that the influence of situational factors are more influential on a person's behavior than was previously thought. It was Mischel's book that brought widespread attention to the situationists' claims (see Epstein and O'Brien 1985, and Kristjánsson 2013 for a more detailed explanation of Mischel's book).

The subject of this thesis, however, is not the psychological but the philosophical discussion between situationists and virtue ethicists. The psychological experiments found their way into philosophy some thirty years later, in the late twentieth century. John Doris (1998, 2002) and Gilbert Harman (1999) were the first to use the results of the psychological experiments mentioned above to argue specifically against the Aristotelian virtues and virtue ethics. Although there are differences in the scope of their claims, they both agree that virtue ethicists overestimate the influence of character traits on our behavior. Instead, Doris and Harman claim that external situational factors influence our behavior and more attention should therefore be focused on these external factors. Their claims have led to a philosophical and conceptual discussion on the nature of Aristotelian virtues. The responses of virtue ethicists have ranged from methodological (Sabini and Silver 2005; Fleming 2006) and conceptual critiques (Kamtekar 2004; Webber 2006) to attempts to reconcile virtue ethics and situationism (Thomson 1997; Merritt 2000; Miller 2013, 2014).

Problem Statement and Research Question

The virtue ethical use of character is twofold: on the one hand, it is a psychological account of how and why we act as we do, which helps us to predict how people will generally act. On the other hand, language on character is used to evaluate people's behavior and prescribe how people should act (see Kristjánsson 2013, 131). According to Doris (1998, 520), situationism puts the virtue ethicists for a dilemma: if the virtue ethicist holds on to the view that character is the main influence on our behavior, he is vulnerable to damaging empirical critique. However, if the virtue ethicist lets go of his psychological claims and focuses on the ethical claims on how we should act to guide people's behavior, the question rises how he can prescribe a psychological account that is not feasible for (most) human beings, which will result in a loss of virtue ethics' practical appeal. Doris therefore argues that, based on this dilemma, situationism offers a better psychological account and therefore "enjoys certain advantages over Aristotelianism as a foundation for normative [or prescriptive] thought" (Doris 1998, 505). In other words, Doris claims that situationism offers a better psychological account to prescribe how we should act.

The consequences of situationism's psychological account can be twofold. As Kristján Krisjánsson explains: "The results of these experiments, then, are deemed *at least* sufficient to shake our previously imperturbable confidence in the existence of consistent cross-situational dispositions […and are] *at most* even sufficient to eliminate the very idea of character and damn the entire fields of virtue ethics and character education" (2008, 59). If the situationists are right in claiming that character traits in the Aristotelian sense do not function as the main influence on our behavior, then we should at least question our former belief in their function. At most, we should question our entire conceptual understanding of character, virtue ethics and the principles we use to prescribe how people should act.

In this thesis, I want to examine the person-situation debate and explore the consequences of the psychological account of the situationists for virtue ethics. I will therefore answer the following research question:

How can Aristotelian virtue ethicists convincingly reply to the criticism of the situationists?

This research question emerged partly out of my personal view on the debate as well as out of the literature. While reading the literature it became clear to me that the best way to explain the debate was by opposing the two positions (virtue ethics and situationism). However, it also became clear to me that I personally found virtue ethics to be more appealing as a theory than situationism. I therefore decided to try

(if possible) to argue in favor of my intuition on virtue ethics by defending virtue ethics against situationism. This is why my research question is formulated from the virtue ethical perspective and includes the word 'convincingly'. This means that I first needed to explain the debate before I can evaluate the different ways in which the virtue ethicists can reply to the situationists. It also means that, to give a complete view, I have to discuss a third position in the debate: the reconciliatory position.

My research question can be divided into four sub-questions:

- What is the Aristotelian/virtue ethical view on virtue ethics and character?
- What does situationism entail, and what is the situationists' critique on virtue ethics?
- What strategies are used to reply to situationism?
- Should the virtue ethical moral psychology be rejected based on the person-situation debate?

My aim is to give an overview of the *types* of arguments that are used in the philosophical person-situation debate, and discuss the consequences this debate has for virtue ethics.

My illustration of the history of the person-situation debate on page six is partly based on an article by Epstein and O'Brien from 1985 called "The Person-Situation Debate in Historical and Current Perspective." In their article, Epstein and O'Brien discuss the historical background of the person-situation debate in psychology, and four classical studies that are used to support the claims of the situationists. After this discussion, they question the situationists' conclusions and make up the balance of which questions have and have not been answered by the situationists. I believe that Epstein and O'Brien's article is one of the last articles that gives an overview of the experiments and the types of arguments used in the person-situation debate. Their article, however, only discusses the history of and the (then) current person-situation debate in *psychology*. As I already explained, the person-situation debate has found its way into philosophy *after* the person-situation debate in psychology. I therefore want to try to do the same for the person-situation debate in philosophy as Epstein and O'Brien did for the person-situation debate in psychology; to give an overview of the different types of arguments used in the person-situation debate in philosophy, as well as examine the consequences of these arguments for virtue ethics. To explain the different argument used in the debate it

will also be necessary to know more about the experiments used most as evidence for the situationists' claims.

Thesis Outline

To answer my research question ('can Aristotelian virtue ethicists convincingly reply to the criticism of the situationists?') I will first answer my four sub-questions. I will therefore start, in chapter 1, with answering the first sub-question ('what is the Aristotelian/virtue ethical view on virtue ethics and character?'). In §1.1 I will discuss the use of virtue in Greek tradition. After this initial discussion I will turn to an explanation of Aristotle's virtue ethics as he explains it in the *Nicomachean Ethics* in §1.2. In §1.3 I will discuss contemporary explanations of some of Aristotle's central concepts. I will end the first chapter with a conclusion in which I will answer the first sub-question.

To answer my second sub-question ('what does situationism entail, and what is the situationists' critique on virtue ethics?') I will first explain the situationists' main thesis in §2.1. After this general sketch of the situationists' claim I will turn to two psychological experiments that are used most by the situationists as evidence to support their claims in §2.2. Situationists argue against two central concepts of Aristotle's virtue ethics: character and practical wisdom. I will discuss their arguments against character in detail in §2.3. In §2.4 I will discuss their arguments against practical wisdom. After these sections the situationists' critique against virtue ethics should be clear. I will therefore turn to situationism's positive account in §2.5. Finally, in §2.6, I will discuss the scope of situationism to offer a complete picture of what the situationists do and do not claim. I will end the second chapter with a conclusion in which I will answer the sub-question.

To answer my third sub-question ('what strategies are used to reply to situationism?') I will first discuss two virtue ethical replies to situationism in §3.1.1 and §3.1.2: the methodological strategy and the conceptual strategy. There is, however, also a third position in the person-situation debate: a reconciliatory position that is neither virtue ethical, nor situationist. I will discuss an example of a reconciliatory position called the 'Mixed Trait Theory' in §3.2. The conclusion of this chapter will consist of a summary of the replies and an answer to the sub-question.

In the fourth and final chapter of this thesis I will question whether the virtue ethicists should rethink or reject their moral psychology by answering my fourth sub-question ('Should the virtue ethical moral psychology be rejected based on the person-situation debate?'). I will argue here that there lies a different perspective on the role of psychology and ethics lies at the core of the debate. To explain my argument I will start, in §4.1, with an explanation of Doris' view on the importance

of 'ethical realism'. In §4.2 I will further examine this concept of ethical realism to judge to what extent Doris argument—based on his idea of ethical realism—against virtue ethics holds true. In §4.3 I will argue that virtue ethics is actually 'ethical realistic', but, more importantly, ethics is less concerned with how people *do* act than with how people *should* act. In §4.4 I will question the situationists' critique on practical wisdom by offering two different perspectives on our moral reasoning. I will end this chapter with an answer to my sub-question.

At the end of this thesis I will answer my research question by formulating a general conclusion in which I will summarize the answers to the different sub-questions.

Theoretical Relevance

As I explained, my aim in this thesis is to give an overview of the *types* of arguments that are used in the philosophical person-situation debate, and discuss the consequences this debate has for virtue ethics.

Much has already been written on the different philosophical arguments for or against situationism. In reading this literature, I found that what was lacking was an article that gave an overview of the different types of arguments that are used in the person-situation debate in philosophy. The theoretical relevance of this thesis is therefore to give an up-to-date overview of the different types of arguments used in the person-situation debate in philosophy, and to examine the consequences the debate has virtue ethics.

Chapter 1
Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

In this first chapter, I will explain Aristotle's virtue ethics by answering the following sub-question:

What is the Aristotelian/virtue ethical view on virtue ethics and character?

In answering this question, I will illustrate the position that is criticized by the situationists and give the reader an understanding of what Aristotle's ethics entails, guarding the reader from any false depiction of virtue ethics. I will also defend the moral theory, showing that it does not lose its viability because of the situationists' critique.

To achieve my aim, I will start in §1.1 by comparing Socrates and Plato's view on virtue with Aristotle's, in order to illustrate the tradition Aristotle comes from and how his ideas differ from Plato and Socrates' ideas. Next, I will turn to a more detailed (although far from complete) explanation of Aristotle's ethics in §1.2. Aristotle explains his moral theory in two ethical treatises, the *Eudemian Ethics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Although there is no conclusive evidence as to which of these works was written first, it is widely assumed that the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) is the later (and improved) version of the *Eudemian Ethics*; chapters of the latter appear in the former and the *Nicomachean Ethics* discusses topics that are not discussed in the *Eudemian Ethics* (Kraut, 2014). Therefore, I will use the *Nicomachean Ethics*[1] to explain Aristotle's ethics, as this seems to be the final version of his ethics. In the *NE*, Aristotle makes some methodological and conceptual assumptions that may confuse the modern reader. In §1.3, I will therefore further explain three central topics of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: happiness, the relation between moral virtue and practical wisdom, and moral development. This further explanation will mostly be based on modern literature by C.D.C. Reeve (2002), Richard Kraut (1979), and Myles

[1] All references from Aristotle refer to the Nicomachean Ethics translated by W.D. Ross (Oxford World's Classics edition, revised by Lesley Brown, 2009), unless indicated otherwise. Although Brown's edition differs in some aspects from earlier editions (see Mulhern 2009), this edition does follow the well-known W.D. Ross translation, which makes it a very practical book for my present purpose.

Burnyeat (2012), authors who are known for their historical works, or on renowned sources such as the *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* series.

1.1 Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle on Virtue

In the western world, Plato and Aristotle are seen as the founding fathers of virtue ethics (Hursthouse 2013). However, Aristotle's ethics differs from both Plato's and even Socrates' ethical theory. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates is said to claim that virtue is singular (knowledge) and he even concludes that no one does evil knowingly or intentionally (*Protagoras* 358-359c;[2] *NE*.VII.2.1145b20-30). Instead, wrongdoing is done out of ignorance because the agent does not see what is good and therefore does not act according to it. Although Plato did not agree with the view of virtue as singular and focused more on the relation between reason and the virtues, he, like Socrates, also emphasized the role of reason, holding on to the view that all branches of knowledge are unified (Kraut 2014).

Aristotle distances himself (to some degree) from both Socrates and Plato. Aristotle claims that Socrates was right in believing that all virtues can only exist in the presence of reason, viz. the virtue of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), but he was wrong in believing that all virtues are a *kind of* reason (*NE* VI.13.1144b17-22). Aristotle also explicitly disagrees with Plato in book I of the *NE*. Although he agrees with Plato that our good lies in the dominance of reason over the irrational parts of our soul, he rejects Plato's metaphysics of the forms, especially the form of the good (*NE* I.6; Kraut 2014). Instead, Aristotle argues for a specific purpose of human life, claiming that what is good is not transcendent in the platonic sense, but specific to the kind of object or creature—a teleological argument that has later been called the 'function argument' or the '*ergon*[3] inference', which I shall expound presently (Kraut 2014; Barney 2008; Johnson 2005).

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[2] All references to Plato's works are from *Plato. Complete Works* (1997), edited by John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson. The passage I am referring to here is: "[Socrates] Now, no one goes willingly toward the bad or what he believes to be bad; neither is it in human nature, so it seems, to want to go toward what one believes to be bad instead of to the good. And when he is forced to choose between one of two bad things, no one will choose the greater if he is able to choose the lesser" (*Protagoras* 358d). In this passage, Socrates defends the view that wrong actions are done out of ignorance by people who lack a measure of real pleasure; that measure is knowledge.

[3] Greek for 'function', but also 'task' or 'work' (Brown 2009, introduction X; Johnson 2005, 218).

1.2 Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

The main components of Aristotle's moral theory are the happiness and the 'function argument', (the relation between) moral virtue and practical wisdom, and his conception of moral development, which I will explain in detail in the following section. In doing so, I will use mostly the *NE* to stay as close as possible to Aristotle's own explanation.

Happiness and the Function Argument

Aristotle believed that the good of something or someone is relative to it (*NE*.I.7.1097a15-25). Since ethics is about good or right human action, Aristotle starts the *NE* with an investigation into the human good, or "the highest attainable good by action" (Brown 2009, X). Most people, if not all, agree on the name of this highest good: happiness (*eudaimonia*[4]) (*NE*.I.4.1095a15-20), but opinions differ about what happiness is; some equate it with wealth, others with honor (*NE*.I.5). Through a process of elimination, Aristotle comes to an 'objective' definition of happiness: it must be a final end and self-sufficient (*NE*.I.7.1097b20). It must be a final end because happiness—the highest attainable good by action—is that for the sake of which man does all that he does. No other end, whether it is wealth or honor, is a final end; even wealth and honor are sought after for the sake of happiness (*NE*.I.7.1097b1-5). By definition, this final end is also the highest, for it does not stand in service to anything else. It must also be self-sufficient because for it to be the *highest* end, it must not depend on anything else, but it should, on its own, make life "desirable and lacking of nothing" (*NE*.I.7.1097b15).

The picture painted above only outlines happiness by formulating the criteria that it must meet. Aristotle wants to find a more detailed account by looking at the function of man, for just as a carpenter, artist, or even our eyes have specific functions, so too, according to Aristotle, does man have a specific function. This is also known as 'the function argument'. As Aristotle explains, the good of a thing or person seems to reside in the function it or he has (*NE*.I.7.1097b20-25): a good knife is sharp, a good eye can see clearly, and a good artist makes excellent art. It is the function of a thing or person that makes it special and different from everything

[4] Although *eudaimonia* is translated here as 'happiness', it does not mean happiness the way we use it now. Another way to translate *eudaimonia* is with 'flourishing' (Kraut 1979, 168; Brown 2009, X).

else and since we are looking for the highest good for a human being, we should be looking at man's specific function to understand what is good for him.[5]

According to Aristotle, man shares a life of nutrition with the plants and a life of perception with the animals; therefore, neither of these can be the function of a human being because they do not differentiate a human from a plant or an animal. What is specifically human is "an active life of the element that has reason; of this, one part has it in the sense of being obedient to reason, the other in the sense of possessing reason and exercising thought" (*EN*.I.7.1098a1-5). Happiness, or the highest attainable good by action, thus turns out to be "activity of the soul exhibiting virtue"[6] (1098a15-17). Virtue (*arête*) should be understood as 'excellence'. Aristotle's line of reasoning here is that happiness is the highest good attainable by action, and what makes human life good is performing the function of a human as best as possible. The function that is specifically human is 'an active life of the element that has reason', which is an activity of the soul. Happiness, therefore, is an activity of the soul (the rational element) that exhibits virtue (is excellent in what it does).

Character, Moral Virtue, and Practical Wisdom

For Aristotle, happiness is thus an activity, consisting of a life in which the soul exhibits virtue. In other words, it arises when the functions of the soul are performed in an excellent manner. He divides the soul into an irrational part and a rational part. As we have just seen, human beings share the function of nutrition with plants (a vegetative part), and the function of desire with animals (a desiring part). These two functions of the soul make up the irrational part, where the vegetative part is in no way rational, but the desiring part is; it shares in reason in that it obeys it (*NE*.I.13.1102b25-1103a1). The virtue (excellence) of the desiring part that obeys reason is called *moral virtue* (such as courage and liberality). The virtue of the rational part of the soul is called *intellectual virtue* (such as philosophical and practical wisdom). Since Aristotle has found two categories[7] of virtue (intellectual and moral), the next step in explaining the happy (or flourished) life is to further explain these virtues. As Brown explains, "what makes them virtues is simply that,

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[5] This line of reasoning may be off-putting to the modern day reader and I will further explain this line of reasoning in the next section (§1.3). For now, it is enough to follow Aristotle's line of reasoning in order to understand his account of happiness.

[6] According to Brown, the concept of soul should be interpreted as "the capacities of a living thing in so far as it is alive" (2009, xiii).

[7] No metaphysical or other philosophical meaning is intended by the use of the word 'category'. I do not mean anything other than the everyday meaning of the word, by which I mean a form of grouping or classification.

by having and exercising them, one is living a life that is the best for a human being" (Brown 2009, XIII).

Aristotle defines full virtue (i.e. being virtuous and leading the happy or excellent life) along the lines of the two kinds of virtue I just explained. He defines virtue as "a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by reason, and by that reason by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it" (*NE*.II.6.1106b35-1107a2). In this definition, Aristotle illustrates the role of both moral virtue and intellectual virtue in leading a happy or excellent life; (full) virtue consists of both a state of character as well as the right understanding (practical wisdom). Since Aristotle's inquiry is a practical one, he aims to give the reader a guide on how to become good (1103b25-30). The intellectual virtue of *knowing* how to act is not enough (see specifically NE.VI.1.1139a25-1139b15). One must also have the disposition (*hexis*) to act: the right state of character.

The first step in explaining full virtue is therefore explaining what moral virtue is. According to Aristotle, there are three kind of 'things' found in the soul: passions, which are feelings such as fear or anger; capacities, which are the 'things' that enable us to feel these passions, such as becoming angry or feeling scared; and states of character, which are "the things in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to the passions" (*NE*.II.5.1105b25-6). As human beings, we are capable of feeling certain pleasurable or painful feelings such as anger or joy, and how we react to them is what Aristotle calls a state of character; a just person will feel angry if he witnesses injustice simply because he has the state of character of justness. According to Aristotle, moral virtue is also a state of character: it is the right dispositions, the right feeling towards our passions and desires. In other words, a moral virtue is an excellent state of character, one that is 'good'.

The excellence of these character traits or dispositions is what Aristotle calls *moral virtue*. This state of character is developed through habit: we become honest by repeatedly performing honest actions, generous by performing generous acts, etc. (*NE*.II.1.1103a17). Yet, Aristotle acknowledges that in life, no two actions or situations are the same. The right state of character is therefore a mean between defect and excesses, a mean that is relative to us:

> Moral virtue […] is concerned with passions and actions, and in these there is excess, defect, and the intermediate […] in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate

> and best, and this is the characteristic of virtue […] For men are good in but one way, but bad in many. (*NE*.II.6.1106b15-24, 35)

This passage illustrates that moral virtue, or the right kind of dispositions, is not a fixed state. It consists of a mean between pleasure and pain; a delicate equilibrium of feeling the pain and pleasure at the right time, towards the right people etc. Being generous, for example, does not mean that one should always give a lot of money. In fact, sometimes one needs to give more than at other times and if one gets it wrong, he or she could become lavish instead. Moral virtue, then, is actually only the first part of the definition of the virtue that Aristotle gave earlier: "a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us" (*NE*.II.6.1106b35-1107a2). The result of Aristotle's theory on the mean is that is can be difficult to act virtuous, for, as the passage shows, one can go wrong in may ways, but only right in one way.

The second part of Aristotle's definition of virtue—"determined by reason, and by that reason by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it" (*NE*.II.6.1106b35-1107a2)—refers to practical wisdom (*phronesis*), which is a part of the intellectual virtues. In book VI, chapter 3, Aristotle distinguishes between five 'chief' intellectual virtues: art, scientific knowledge, practical wisdom, philosophical wisdom, and intuitive reason. Of these intellectual virtues, scientific knowledge (concerned with demonstration and things eternal), intuitive reason (the grasp of the first principle that cannot be proven through demonstration and are therefore not scientific knowledge), and philosophical wisdom (the combination of intuitive reason and scientific knowledge) are part of the intellect that is contemplative. Art (the capacity to make, involving true reason) and practical wisdom (the capacity to act with regard to what is good or bad for man) are part of the intellect and truth that is practical (*NE*.VI.3-7). In book X, Aristotle explains that happiness should be an activity in accordance with the highest virtue, which is the best thing in us. He identifies this activity as contemplation, because, based on the function argument, reason is the best thing in us, and reasoning is self-sufficient; we can "contemplate the truth more continuously than we can *do* anything" (*NE*.X.7.1177a23-4). However, this life of pure contemplation is not possible for man, for, unlike the gods, he is confronted with practical matters; we are not self-sufficient but need such practical matters as food and prosperity to be able to contemplate continuously. We must try, however, to live in accordance with the best thing in us, which is reason, as much as possible. Due to man's lack of godlike self-sufficiency, there is a life that is happy in a secondary degree: the life that is in accordance with

the other virtues (*NE*.X.8. 1178a9-11), which is the life I want to discuss here. In this life, both moral virtue and practical wisdom play an important role.

Practical wisdom is a capacity that expresses itself through deliberation on the things that are variable: "is a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good and bad for man […] A reasoned and true state of capacity with regard to human goods" (NE.VI.5.1140b4-5, 20-1). Aristotle explains that by nature, we might have certain 'natural' virtues; we might have the disposition towards honest or generous behavior. Yet, having the disposition alone is not enough, for a child who is honest does not know how or when to be honest and as a result his honesty can be harmful. To be fully virtuous, we need not have natural virtue, but "virtue in the strict sense" (NE.VI.13.1144b15): virtue that involves practical wisdom. Moral virtue makes us desire the right end (happiness), but this end is a general end and there is no manual on how to act virtuously (according to the mean) in specific situations. Practical wisdom is our "informed judgment" (Taylor 2008, 220) that helps us decide the mean in a given specific situation, makes us aware of the relevant moral features of that situation, and (in a sense) guides us by showing us how to get to our goal. In contrast to moral virtue, practical wisdom is developed through teaching, experience, and time (NE.II.1.1103a15-18;).[8]

The happy life thus consists of a life where both moral virtue and practical wisdom are present. However, these virtues do not act separately from each other. According to Aristotle, moral virtue and practical wisdom have a reciprocal relation; it is impossible to be virtuous without practical wisdom, but without moral virtue one cannot be practically wise. "Virtues make the goal correct, and practical wisdom makes what leads to it correct" (*NE*.VI.12.1144a5-10). Aristotle emphasizes the reciprocity of moral virtue and practical wisdom in the final chapter of book VI (13.1144b30), claiming that it is impossible to be practically wise without moral virtue, but also impossible to be morally virtuous without practical wisdom. I will further explain this relation between moral virtue and practical wisdom in §1.3.

Moral Development

In the previous sub-section ('character and practical wisdom'), it became clear that to be virtuous, according to Aristotle, a person needs to have both moral virtue and practical wisdom. These virtues, however, are developed differently:

[8] See also §1.3 'Moral Education'.

> Intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit. (*NE*.II.1.1103a14-17)

> But the virtues we get from first exercising them […] For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just act, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. (*NE*.II.1.1103a31-b1)

In these passages, Aristotle explains that the development of moral virtue is a result of habit, while intellectual virtue is developed through teaching. In this sub-section, I will explain Aristotle's conception of moral development by discussing the development of moral virtue and practical wisdom, as well as two moral states in which these virtues are not fully developed: incontinence and continence.[9]

Moral virtue, then, is the result of habit. It is through practice that we learn to develop the right dispositions and character traits. The same goes for builders: as a result of building badly or well, a builder becomes a good or a bad builder. This is also true for the virtues: we become brave or cowardly by acting in a certain way when we find ourselves in dangerous situations and we become just or unjust by acting in a certain way when we interact with others (*NE*.II.1.1103b14-6). By nature, we are neither good nor bad, but we develop good and bad characters throughout life. As in the passage above, the lyre is only the instrument that helps to make one a lyre-player. Whether he is a good or a bad one depends on how he learns and practices; to become good, we must act good. This is why there is a need for teachers to show us *how* to be good (*NE*.II.1.1103b14). In other words, it is through repeated actions and practice that we develop certain virtues or vices. Aristotle stresses the importance of the right form of habituation. It makes all the difference whether the right habits are formed from early childhood, for this is when our character traits are habituated.

Having the right character, however, is not enough. I could, for example, eat my fruits and veggies because I am used to eating them. In this case, it would be hard for people to argue that I have chosen a healthy lifestyle simply because I eat

[9] The terms 'incontinence' and 'continence' are widely used in the literature on Aristotle (see for example Badhwar 1996; Brown 2009; Burnyeat 2012) but can seem strange to readers outside of the field. These terms are meant to indicate two different states in which someone is not fully virtuous; incontinence is meant to indicate, much like our everyday use of the word, a lack of control. Continence, also much like our everyday use of the word, is meant to indicate self-restraint.

my fruits and veggies. Being virtuous, like having a healthy lifestyle, involves a choice. For us to make a choice, we need our intellect. The intellectual virtue that is concerned with these kinds of practical choices is practical wisdom, which is the deliberation on what ought or ought not to be done (*NE*.VI.10. 1143a8-9). Unlike the development of moral virtue, practical wisdom is developed through teaching, which requires experience and time. It consists of *understanding* what is noble and good for man (*NE*.VI.12.1143b21-2), and knowing how to attain the goal of being good and noble. However, as I have explained in the previous sub-section, practical wisdom expresses itself through deliberation on things that are variable, like particular situations. Besides *understanding* what is noble and good for man, we must also gain experience in attaining our goal in different situations. This is why, according to Aristotle, we are unable to find young men who are practically wise: they lack experience.

The moral developmental picture that arises is a complex one. Being virtuous means more than just doing the right thing. Doing the right thing could happen by accident or through the guidance of someone else (*NE*.II.3.1105a22-23). Being virtuous, therefore, requires the agent to be in a certain condition when he 'does the right thing': "in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly, his action must proceed from a firm unchangeable character" (*NE*.II.4.1105a30-b1). The third condition, the unchangeable (right) character, is developed through a process of habituation. This habituation process is meant to implement a right desire and motivation. By learning to despise things that are fearful and learning to love to stand our ground do we learn to become brave (*NE*.II.2.1104a34-b4). Once the right dispositions are formed, we can start to understand *why* these dispositions are the right ones, and how we can and should act upon them, which is the development of practical wisdom. I will further explain Aristotle's view on moral development in §1.3.

By now, it should be clear that a complete lack of both moral virtue and practical wisdom will result in a vicious state,[10] while the possession of both in the right sense will result in a virtuous state. Most people, however, are neither virtuous nor vicious. Aristotle therefore also explains two other states: incontinence and continence. The incontinent person knows that what he does is bad, but he does so as a result of his passion. This person is not practically wise but he may be clever, and is misguided in his judgment because he is under the influence of passions that cloud it. Incontinence can come in different forms or degrees. Someone can be an

[10] The vicious person will have wrong dispositions (vices) instead of moral virtues, and cleverness (a means to end reasoning) instead of practical wisdom.

impulsive, non-deliberative kind of incontinent, or he could deliberate but not abide by his deliberation. There are also those who are incontinent through habituation and those who are incontinent by nature (*NE.*VII.10.1152a27-32). The continent person also knows how he should act, and does so, but feels the desire to do otherwise. His desiring part of the soul and rational part are not yet in harmony (*NE.*VII.3.1145b11-15).

A final point on Aristotle's conception of moral development is that people do not necessarily stay in a moral state for the entirety of their life. Of the different kinds of incontinence, the impulsive, non-deliberative one is more curable than the one where a person deliberates but does not abide by his deliberation. Likewise, those who are incontinent through habituation are more curable than those who are incontinent by nature (*NE.*VII.10.1152a27-32).

1.3 Contemporary Explanations

In the previous section I discussed three central components of Aristotle's virtue ethics: happiness and the function argument, the relation between moral virtue and practical wisdom, and Aristotle's view on moral development. Considering that these three components will play an important role in my thesis, I will use this next section to explain these three components some more by using contemporary literature. Firstly, I will explain how Aristotle's view on happiness differs from our contemporary view on happiness. Secondly, I will explain the relation between moral virtue and practical wisdom some more. Their reciprocal relation, as I explained in §1.2, is a complex one and it is imaginable that my explanation so far has not been sufficient. I will therefore consult a contemporary source for some complementary explanation on this topic. Thirdly and finally, I will further explain the difference in developing moral virtue and practical wisdom, for this explains these two concepts and how they work some more.

Happiness and the Function Argument

The first question that could occur to our modern minds is why Aristotle defines happiness objectively as a final and self-sufficient end. Although it may fit well into Aristotle's line of reasoning, we might counter his definition by explaining our own view: happiness depends on the agent's own view and standards of life. Some people may be entirely happy being rich but without friends, others poor but with a lot of friends. No one 'objective' account of happiness can be given.

Richard Kraut (1979) explains that the difference between our modern view of happiness and Aristotle's objective view of happiness indeed relies on a difference

in standard. Our modern conception of happiness is that it consists of the life *we* would like to lead. It consists of the standard and goals *we* have set for *ourselves* (Kraut 1979, 178). According to Kraut, this does not mean that happiness, in the modern sense, is purely subjective; we would be reluctant to call a man who values friendship happy when his 'friends' are lying about the way they feel about him. The point is that in our modern conception of happiness we judge someone's happiness according to *his or her own* standards of happiness (179), while Aristotle's conception clearly differs from this modern view. For Aristotle, the complete fulfillment of our desires alone is not enough. These desires also need to be directed at goals that are worthwhile (176). However, these goals are not subjective, but objective, closely related to the function of a human being.

The question, then, is why Aristotle would think that human beings have a function. He draws an analogy between other things around us, such as an eye and an artist, to show that these have a function (*NE*.I.7.1097b20-30), but it does not automatically follow from this that human beings, as human beings, also have a function. How should this be interpreted? Rachel Barney explains that for Aristotle, the function of something does not mean that it is better in that specific task than anything else. For example, the function of a knife (cutting) is not its function because it is good or best at it. Instead, the function of something (or someone) is part of Aristotle's teleology:[11] "for Aristotle, to say that a human being has function is to say that a human being has a nature, and end, a characteristic activity, and also a distinctive excellence and good" (Barney 2008, 301-2). Someone's or something's function consists of an activity whose fulfillment has intrinsic value.

Kraut and Barney's explanations—although interpretations—help clarify how and why Aristotle's view on happiness differs from our modern view. Aristotle's view on happiness is connected to his teleology: humans have a specific function or 'task' they should fulfill, and *eudaimonia* is a state in which a human being has fulfilled (or better; is fulfilling) his task. Happiness in the Aristotelian sense is therefore objective: it is the kind of life a human being should live in order to fulfill its purpose. Our modern view on happiness, however, is much more subjective. We judge a person's happiness according to his or her own standard, not some objective standard that is connected to a teleological view on life. To understand Aristotle's virtue ethics means that we should be aware of this difference between his view on happiness and our modern view on happiness.

[11] For more on Aristotle's teleology, see Johnson 2005.

The Relation Between Moral Virtue and Practical Wisdom

We have seen the complexity of the relation between moral virtue and practical wisdom in §1.2. As Aristotle explains in book VI:

> It is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom, or practically wise without virtue. But in this way we may also refute the dialectical argument whereby it might be contended that the virtues exist in separation of each other; the same man, it might be said, is not best equipped by nature for all the virtues, so that he will have already acquired one when he has not yet acquired another. This is possible in respect to natural virtues, but not in respect of which man is called without qualification good; for with the presence of one quality, practical wisdom, will be given all the virtues. (*NE*.VI.13.1144b30-114a2)

This passage seems to imply that moral virtue and practical wisdom are reciprocal; without one you cannot have the other. At the same time, Aristotle seems to imply in this passage that the possession of practical wisdom precedes the other virtues. How, then, should the relation between moral virtue and practical wisdom be interpreted?

John M. Cooper explains how we could interpret the passage above. According to Cooper, "any knowledge about, say, the values involved in courage (as a way of feeling about and reacting to dangers) and in courageous action must see the place of these values in a single overall scheme of moral or ethical goods and bads, including all those involved in all the other ethical virtues" (1998, 266). All virtues use knowledge and this knowledge is the same in every single virtue. As I have already explained, Aristotle writes that all virtues use knowledge: a virtue is only proper when it is directed by thought (see §1.2 'Moral virtue and practical wisdom'. See also Reeve 2002, §14). Cooper thus confirms that the virtues require an underlying rationality that is the same for all of them. However, he adds that this rationality is not the only component of full virtue. The moral virtues are also needed to have the right feelings and to not question one's thoughts. The relation between moral virtue and practical wisdom is thus reciprocal.

Moral Development

In §1.2, we saw that Aristotle explains that moral virtue and the right character traits are developed through habituation, and practical wisdom is developed through teaching, experience, and time. In the previous sub-section, we saw how moral

virtue and practical wisdom are dependent on each other and play a role in each other's development. Still, more can be said about why moral virtue is developed by habit, and what the role of practical wisdom is in the development of moral virtue.

To understand Aristotle's view on moral education, we need to look at a distinction he makes between the *that* and the *because*:

> For while one must begin from what is familiar, this may be taken in two ways: some things are familiar to us, others are familiar without qualification. Presumably, then, what *we* should begin from is things familiar to *us*. This is the reason why one should have been well brought up in good habits if one is going to listen adequately to lectures about things noble and just, and in general about political (social) affairs. For the beginning (starting-point) is 'the *that*', and if this is sufficiently apparent to a person, he will not in addition have a need for 'the *because*'. (*NE*.I.5.1095b12)[12]

According to both Burnyeat (2012, 261) and Curzer (2012, 301), a person who has the *that* knows or believes that something is so, while a person who has the *because* also understands why something is so. As Burnyeat explains, the person who knows the *because* is the man who has practical wisdom and knows what to do in any given situation because he understands *why,* for example, an act is noble or just. The person who has the *that* does not have this understanding, but has internalized ideas on justice and nobility (Burnyeat 2012, 261). Being virtuous involves both the *that* and the *because*, for the virtuous person does virtuous things "in full knowledge of what he is doing, choosing to do them for their own sake, and acting out of a settled state of character" (264).

The passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* I mentioned above indicates what view Aristotle had on moral education. Everything we learn has a starting point. Through perception, we learn that fire is hot, and through induction, we learn that everybody eats (or at least *should* eat if we want to stay alive). Ethics also has its own starting point for grasping the *that*: habituation. Through the right kind of upbringing and habituation, we learn what is noble and just by doing noble and just acts. Habituation is not a form of conditioning; it is not an unconscious process in which certain acts call on certain feelings of nobleness and justice. The process of habituation has a cognitive aspect as well: we actually *learn* what is good and noble by

[12] The quote is from Burnyeat's text. Brown's edition does not translate them to *that* and *because* in the text, but calls them 'the fact' and the 'reason'.

doing (Burnyeat 2002, 263-4). Through habituation we find out that what has been said to us by teachers and other authority figures (that some things are just and noble) is actually *true*. If we have reached this point, we have perception of the *that*. The role of habituation is to morally form someone's character to recognize the truth of the moral virtues, and to teach him to value them for it. This, however, does not mean that he already possesses the moral virtue. As we saw in both §1.2 and the previous sub-section, virtue in the strict sense also requires practical wisdom.

Knowing *that* something is so does not imply that one knows *why* it is so, but one needs to have the *that* before one can have the *because*. According to Burnyeat, having the *that* means knowing the virtues and loving them for what they are: just and noble. One must realize this before one can develop his intellectual capacities (by which I mean practical wisdom) because there is a difference between the person who has learned what is good and noble and the person who loves the virtues and follows them for their own sake. The latter has been taught to understand *why* the virtues are just and noble and, based on this knowledge, is able to "tell what is required for the practice of the virtues in specific circumstances" (Burnyeat 2012, 262). According to Burnyeat, the *because* is taught in a more theoretical kind of fashion, through Aristotle's lectures, for example (261).

Burnyeat's explanation of the *that* and the *because* further illustrates the different 'stages' of moral development that we already saw in §1.2. Moral virtue is developed through a process of habituation. This process is not a form of conditioning but has a cognitive aspect. We learn to recognize the truth of the moral virtues and internalize them. Still, to be virtuous one also needs to know *why* the virtues are just and noble, and to love them for their own sake. This second 'stage' of moral development is more cognitive and is developed through teaching and experience. According to Burnyeat, the teaching Aristotle mentions are his lectures. According to Aristotle, only someone who has already been habituated in the right manner and has enough experience will be responsive to these lectures.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to answer the first sub-question: what is the Aristotelian/virtue ethical view on virtue ethics and character?

According to Aristotle, every action is aimed towards an end and the highest end is called *eudaimonia*, or happiness. Happiness is not a subjective but an objective end, consisting of the fulfillment of a function that is specifically human. Being happy means living a fulfilled life during which our function is performed in an

excellent or virtuous manner. Aristotle distinguishes two categories of virtues: moral virtue and intellectual virtue.

As I explained in §1.2, human beings have character traits that are dispositions to react to and on the passions we feel. We can react to our passions in a bad, good, or excellent way, and thus have bad, good, or excellent character traits. The excellent character traits are what Aristotle calls moral virtue; these are the right dispositions in order to act accordingly; it is a mean between defect and excess. We develop these dispositions through a process of habituation. Having these dispositions, however, is not enough. We must also have practical wisdom (an intellectual virtue) in order to recognize how to act in a specific situation and to attain our goal of happiness. The development of practical wisdom takes time, teaching, and experience. The combination of moral virtue and practical wisdom is what Aristotle calls 'virtue in the strict sense'. A virtuous person, according to Aristotle, knows why and when to act, and towards whom.

Aristotle's virtue ethics thus consists of a moral psychological account of a person to guide one to act in a morally desirable way. By becoming virtuous, we will act virtuously. The concept of character plays an important role in his virtue ethics; it is the motivational aspect that makes the goal correct. Practical wisdom, however, is also a central concept in Aristotle's virtue ethics. His emphasis on the role of character and practical wisdom on our moral decision-making has recently been criticized from a psychological point of view. In the next chapter, I will examine this modern critique on Aristotle's virtue ethics and also discuss two virtue ethical lines of reply.

Chapter 2
Situationism

In the previous chapter, I explained Aristotle's virtue ethics. It became clear that the central claims of his virtue ethics revolve around moral virtue and practical wisdom. To be virtuous means to have both the right dispositions and to know how and why to act in the right fashion. In this chapter, I will turn to a critical debate on the existence and role of character traits and practical wisdom that was initiated by philosophers known as situationists. The aim of this chapter is to answer the following sub-question:

What does situationism entail,
and what is the situationists' critique on virtue ethics?

I will answer this question by explaining both situationists' critique on the existence and influence of our character traits, and their critique on the existence of practical wisdom.

To answer this sub-question I will start with a general illustration of the situationist thesis in §2.1. Most situationists use the results of two experiments ('the Milgram experiment' and 'the Good Samaritan experiment') as evidence for their claims. I will therefore discuss these experiments in §2.2. After these first two sections I will turn to a more detailed account of situationism. In §2.3 I will discuss why and how situationists reject the Aristotelian notion of character. In the next section, §2.4, I will discuss the situationists' critique on the Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom. In §2.5, I will discuss the situationists' alternatives to the virtue ethical view on character and practical wisdom. In the last section before the conclusion, §2.6, I will discuss the scope of the situationists' claims. I will end this chapter with a conclusion in which I will answer the sub-question.

My main focus will be on philosophical situationism in the embodiment of the works of John Doris and Gilbert Harman, because, as I previously explained (p. 6) they were among the first to use the results of the psychological experiments in the person-situation debate in philosophy. As a result, they are seen as the main advocates of philosophical situationism and their work has been the focus of most of the (virtue ethical) critique against situationism. I will focus more on Doris than on Harman, because Doris gives a more detailed account of the situationists' thesis.

2.1 The Situationists' Main Thesis

In 1968, psychologist Walter Mischel wrote his book *Personality and Assessment*, in which he argued that situations influence people's behavior more than theorists and psychologists had previously thought. According to Mischel, this influence of situations results in "characterological inconsistencies across diffuse situations" (Kristjánsson 2011, e57). In other words, Mischel argued that we have generally overestimated the predictive value of our character traits, and underestimated the influence of situations.

As Kristjánsson (2011, e57) explains, Mischel's book can be best understood in the context in which it was written. When his book came out there was a 'revolt' by social psychologists against personality psychologists. The latter tried to explain individual behavior and differences in behavior by inner personality constructs. Personality psychologists' lack of attention to people's sensitivity to social features frustrated social psychologists. At the same time there was a trend in psychology away from overarching global constructs towards more specific and detailed ones to explain people's behavior. Mischel's book fitted in well with both of these developments.

The (heated) person-situation debate in psychology eventually cooled down when psychologists came to a conclusion that could be summarized in the formula '*B= f(P,S)*': behavior is a function of both personality and situational/social features. We can predict broad patterns in people's behavior by looking at the their personality traits, but situation specific features often play an important role in people's behavior (Kristjánsson 2011, e58).

As I explained in the introduction of this thesis, some philosophers have used the experimental results from the person-situation debate in psychology to question the existence and influence of the virtue ethical character traits and virtues. Among the first philosophers to do this were Gilbert Harman in his article "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error" (1999) and John Doris in his article "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics" (1998) and, in more detail, in his books *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (2002). According to them, we have overestimated the influence of our character on our behavior and we are therefore unable to accurately predict how people will act in certain situations. A result of our misunderstanding of character is also that we expect too much form people: we expect them to be honest in a consistent manner, but Doris and Harman question whether this is possible.

They base their claims on the results of different experiments, two of which I will discuss in the next section (§2.2), and they claim that we should use these

results to form a better psychological account of how people reason and judge, and what influences our behavior. According to Harman and Doris, we are influenced mainly by (morally irrelevant) situational factors (i.e. external factors that are specific to a certain situation we find ourselves in) and we should account for the extent of the influence of these factors if we want to be able to predict how people will act, but also if we want to produce morally desirable behavior. For if we know to what extent we can be influenced by (seemingly) irrelevant external situational factors, we can better prepare ourselves and maybe avoid situations which will be conducive to morally undesirable behavior.

As a result of their thesis that behavior is mostly influenced by (morally irrelevant) situational factors, these philosophers became known as 'situationist'. Philosophical situationism can thus be summarized as an approach where certain philosophers—known as situationists—use results from psychological experiments to criticize the existence or influence of the virtue ethical concepts of character and virtue. Instead, situationists argue that external situational factors are the main influence on our behavior and decision-making.

To explain the situationists' main thesis it might be best to look at the following example. Imagine Jim: a thirty-year-old man, happily married, and father of two. Jim works for Greenpeace and in his spare time he volunteers at the local retirement home. Now imagine Mark: also a thirty-year-old man, in a relationship but with no children. Mark works for a big bank in London, likes to make money and to party, cheats on his girlfriend, and occasionally uses some recreational drugs. Let us further imagine that both of these men find themselves in the following situation: while walking through a mall someone in front of them drops a stack of papers that is in danger of being blown away. The question is: how will Jim and Mark react? The most likely answer is that Jim would probably help to pick up the papers, while Mark would walk past them. We base our judgment and our prediction on the information we got from the example. Jim is clearly the caring type, while Mark is probably best described as the egoistic type. It is therefore most probable that Jim will help and Mark will not.[13]

However, as I already explained, the situationists claim that our common understanding of character traits, and the influence they have on our behavior, is

[13] This example is inspired by an experiment by Alice M. Isen and Paula F. Levin (1972), known as the 'Dime experiment'. In a payphone in a mall, a dime was planted in some cases, and left out in other cases. All of the callers were confronted with a confederate that dropped a folder full of papers. The results of the experiment were that the 'dime-finding' group helped on more occasions than the group that did not find a dime. According to Doris, this result suggests that people are influenced by situational factors when they make a decision, instead of their character (Doris 1998, 504).

based on a misunderstanding of how our behavior is influenced. This misunderstanding is what Harman calls *the fundamental attribution error* (Harman 1999, 316, based on Ross 1977). According to Harman, we attribute stable character traits, (i.e. the kind of character traits Aristotle writes about that influence our behavior across different situations) based on what he calls our common or 'folk' intuition (1999, 315; 2003, 88). Yet if we look at the empirical psychological evidence, we see that there is no ground for our attribution of character traits. As Harman concludes:

> We very confidently attribute character traits to other people in order to explain their behavior. But our attributions tend to be wildly incorrect and, in fact, there is no evidence that people differ in character traits. They differ in their situations and in their perception of their situations. They differ in their goals, strategies, neuoses, optimism, etc. *But character traits do not explain what differences there are.* (Harman 1999, 329; my italics)

According to Harman, not only do we wrongfully attribute character traits to people that they (or most of us) do not have, but we also do not accept (or at least we ignore) the evidence that suggests otherwise. This disregarding of the evidence is what Harman calls *the confirmation bias* (Harman 2003, 90). Together, the fundamental attribution error and the confirmation bias form an empirically inadequate account of our moral psychology. It paints a picture of people with character traits that help them to act consistently, and our understanding of these character traits help us to predict their behavior. However, what actually happens according to the situationists is that our behavior is influenced most by external factors, and our character traits (to the extent that we have them) do not influence our behavior in any substantial way.

2.2 The Experiments

Before I turn to a detailed explanation of situationism, I will first discuss two experiments that are used widely as evidence to support the claims of the situationists: the Milgram experiment and the Good Samaritan experiment. Although these two experiments are half a century old, they are still widely used as evidence for the situationists' thesis, and critiqued by those who argue against situationism (see for example Doris 1999, 2002; Harman 2003; Kamtekar 2004; Sabini and Silver 2005; Kristjánsson 2008; Miller 2013, 2014). These experiments

thus play a central role in the philosophical person-situation debate and explaining these experiments will help explain the situationists' thesis.

The Milgram Experiment

In 1963, an article called "Behavioral Study of Obedience" appeared in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* in which its author, Stanley Milgram, explained an experiment he conducted at a Yale University laboratory. The aim of the experiment was to study the role of obedience in our decision-making, and to question whether obedience would overrule our own beliefs and rules of conduct. To examine this, subjects were fooled into thinking that they were punishing another man in an adjoining room for giving wrong answers to questions. The results were rather shocking.

The setup of the experiment was as follows: forty naïve male subjects between the ages of twenty and fifty responded to an advertisement or direct mail solicitation to participate in an experiment on the effect of punishment on learning, which was actually Milgram's obedience experiment. When they arrived at Yale University, the subjects were given an explanation of the experiment, in which they were told that the goal of the experiment was to find out what the effect of punishment on learning was. The experiment consisted of a learner and teacher. To determine who would have which role, the subjects were introduced to an accomplice (of course the subjects did not know this) and they both drew a piece of paper. The drawing was rigged to always give the subject the role of the teacher and the accomplice the role of the learner. After the roles were settled, both the subject and the accomplice were taken to an adjoining room where the learner was strapped to an electric chair. For extra credibility, the learner asked the experimenter whether the shocks he would be given were safe, to which the experimenter answered: "although the shock can be extremely painful, they cause no permanent tissue damage" (Milgram 1963, 373). The subject was then escorted to a different room and the learner was strapped to the chair.

After this initial setup, the subject found himself in a room with an experimenter. In front of the subject was an instrumental panel of a shock generator with thirty switches labeled from fifteen to four hundred and fifty volts. Each switch indicated fifteen volts higher than the previous one, and each group of four switches was labeled as: slight shock, moderate shock, strong shock, very strong shock, intense shock, extreme intensity shock, and danger: severe shock. The subjects were given the assignment to read words pairs to the learner and then read only the first word and give four options. The learner had to give the right combination by pressing one of the four buttons in front of him, which would light up at the top of

the shock generator. If the learner made a mistake, he would receive a shock from the subject. One important element of this assignment was that the subjects had to step up the level of volts after each wrong answer (starting with fifteen volts). What the subjects did not know was that, just like the drawing of the roles, the shock generator was also rigged. The accomplice/learner did not actually receive a shock, he only faked a reaction. To ensure that the setup was credible, the subjects all received a forty-five volt sample shock to the wrist.

The goal of the experiment was to see how far subjects would go in shocking the learner before disobeying the experimenter. During the experiment, the subjects received predetermined responses from the learner and the experimenter. The learner would pound on the wall after a three hundred volt shock was administered, after which his answers would not light up on the shock generator. He would pound again at the three hundred and fifteen volt charge, after which all would be quiet, including a lack of answers appearing on the shock generator. After the first pounding on the wall, most subjects would look at the experimenter for guidance but were encouraged to continue shocking the learner despite the lack of answers. The experimenter had only four reactions, all said in a "firm, but not impolite" (Milgram 1963, 374) manner:

1. "Please continue." / "Please go on."
2. "The experiment requires that you continue."
3. "It is absolutely essential that you continue."
4. "You have no other choice, you *must* continue." (Milgram 1963, 374)

This was a fixed sequence of reactions. If the first did not work, the experimenter would use the second, and so on. If the subject refused to act after the fourth remark, the experiment would be called to a halt. The experiment would also stop when the maximum shock was administered.

Before the experiment, Milgram expected (as did fourteen senior psychology students who were asked to give their prediction) that only a small percentage of the subjects would administer the highest shock. The results however, were quite different: of the forty subjects, twenty six obeyed the experimenter until the end, five subjects stopped after the three hundred mark (the accomplice would pound on the wall), four subjects administered one shock after that before refusing to go on, two subjects stopped at the three hundred and thirty mark, one subject on the three hundred and forty five mark, one on the three hundred and sixty mark, and one at the three hundred and seventy-five mark.

From these results, Milgram derived two findings. The first finding was that although the subjects had learned from childhood onwards that it is morally wrong to hurt people against their will, most of them still continued with the experiment until the end, despite showing their disapproval. This was interesting because even the experimenters, who were present during the experiment, could not believe the sheer force of obedience that was displayed. The second finding pertained to the effect the experiment had on the subjects; they showed great distress while performing the experiment, varying from sweating and stuttering to uncontrolled laughing.

In the next section (§2.3), I will explain how and why situationists think the Milgram experiment refutes our traditional idea of character.

The Good Samaritan Experiment

In 1973, Darley and Batson performed an experiment to examine the influence of situational factors and personality on helping behavior. For the experiment, difference in personality was understood in terms of religiosity. The difference in situation that is relevant for this thesis is the level of hurry of the subjects.

The subjects of the experiment were forty seminary students at Princeton Theological Seminary. They were asked to participate in an experiment on religious education and vocations. The first part of the experiment consisted of a questionnaire in which the subjects were asked questions about their religious preference, which was meant to establish the (difference in) personality of the subjects. The second part of the experiment consisted of the subjects reading either a *task-relevant* message about the job perspectives of seminar students, or a *helping-relevant* message, which was the Good Samaritan parable from the Bible. After reading their message the subjects were asked to give a small three to five minute presentation about what they thought of the message they had read. They were told by an assistant to give their presentation in a neighboring building in one of three ways:

1. A high-hurry condition: the assistant looked at his watch and told the subject that he was expected to be in the other building a few minutes ago and that he had better get a move on.
2. An intermediate-hurry condition: the assistant told the subject that another assistant was ready for her in the other building.
3. A low-hurry condition: the assistant told the subject that the assistant in the other building would not be ready for another few minutes, but that the subject might as well head over there.

The subject would then proceed to head over to the other building and between buildings he would find someone "sitting slumped in a doorway, head down, eyes closed, not moving" (Darley & Batson 1973, 104). When the subject walked by, the 'victim' would cough twice and groan. If the subject asked if everything was all right, the victim would tell him that he had a respiratory condition but that he was all right because he had just taken his new medication and a few minutes rest would do the trick. If the subject insisted on helping, the victim would allow it. Darley and Batson (ibid.) created a six-point scale to rate helping behavior ranging from zero (the subject did not notice the victim as in need of help at all) to five (the subject stopped and insisted on taking the victim inside, refused to leave the victim and/or insisted on taking him outside of the surroundings of the experiment). After giving the presentation, the subjects were debriefed about the exact nature of the experiment and were asked questions about what happened.

The results of the experiment were that reading a task-relevant message or a helping-relevant message did not influence the helping behavior of the subject. Neither did the religiosity of the subjects. The experimenters expected that being occupied with a story about helping someone in need (the Good Samaritan parable) would influence helping behavior but, judging from the results, this did not seemed to be the case. The only effect on helping that was significant was the amount of hurry the subject was in. Forty percent of the subjects offered help in some form or another, while sixty percent did not. Of the forty percent that helped, sixty-three percent were in a low-hurry, forty-five percent in an intermediate-hurry, and ten percent were in a high-hurry state.

Darley and Batson concluded that being in a hurry decreases the chance of helping someone in need: "it is difficult not to conclude from this that the frequently cited explanation that ethics becomes a luxury as the speed of our daily lives increases is at least an accurate description" (1973, 107). This, however, does not tell us *why* someone in a hurry does not help someone in need; does he fail to notice the person in need or does he simply decide not to help? Fortunately, Darley and Batson discuss this question. In the debriefing and discussion after the experiment, some subjects who were in a hurry did acknowledge that the victim was in need of help, but they only did this when reflecting on what happened. During the experiment, they did not seem to notice. Some of the subjects concluded from these reflections that it would be wrong to say that they simply decided not to help. According to them, a more accurate description of the situation was that "they *did not perceive the scene in the alley as an occasion for an ethical decision*" (Darley & Batson 1973, 108; my italics). For other subjects, the correct explanation was that they simply decided not to help. This, too, does not really explain the situation to the full extent; why did

they decide to refrain from helping? They probably did not refrain from helping per se; they were already in the process of helping the experimenter with the experiment, and he was relying on the subject for the experiment to succeed. Therefore, instead of concluding that the subject simply decided not to help at all, the real problem would seem to be that the subject was in *conflict* about helping.

The most relevant conclusion drawn from the Good Samaritan experiment is that the question of whether or not a person helps is a decision that is made immediately and most influenced by situational factors.

2.3 Situationists on Character

The two experiments I discussed in the previous section are the kind of psychological evidence Harman refers to when he explains the fundamental attribution error and the confirmation bias. Harman and Doris claim that we would expect, based on the attribution error, that the subjects of the Milgram experiment would disobey the experimenter before the shocks got too intense. We would also expect that most of the subjects in the Good Samaritan experiment would help the person in need. However, what these experiments illustrate, according to Doris and Harman, is that we seem to be mistaken in the existence and effect of character traits on our behavior. The results of these experiments seem to suggest that not our character traits, but the (morally irrelevant) external situational factors are the main influence on our (moral) behavior.

In this section I will further explain the view of the situationists on character, based on the work of John Doris, because he offers a detailed account of the situationists' thesis. Doris argues against what he calls a 'globalist' view on character and character traits. This globalist view is based on Owen Flanagan's explanation of global character traits (Flanagan 1991, 279). Flanagan explains that a global trait is a trait that is consistent throughout different situations (cross-situationally stable or consistent). We use these global traits in our language to indicate some "minimal core or default meaning" (ibid.). We all understand what someone means when he calls someone courageous, even if we do not know the specifics of *how* he is courageous. He could, for example, be someone who fought off burglars, or someone who fought against cancer. We thus use these global character traits to indicate some sort of stability in someone's behavior. If someone is known to be honest, we expect him to be honest today as well as tomorrow, at home as well as in court. These global traits, however, are not *totally* situation independent: "a global trait ascription can seem to imply, but cannot on reflection be taken to imply, a trait which is totally situation insensitive-that is, a trait that is displayed no matter what

[…] happily, there just are no such traits. On any reasonable view traits are situation sensitive" (Flanagan 1991, 280). According to Flanagan, global character traits are traits that are, to some extent, situation independent and refer to some default meaning.

The concept of global character traits is an important aspect of Aristotelian virtue ethics. According to Aristotle (see chapter 1) a virtuous agent will act from his stable/firm and unchangeable character. What this means is that whatever the situation, an honest person will act honestly when the conditions clearly ask for it. Yet this view on character is exactly the view Doris contests (Tully, 2014).

According to Doris, the globalist/Aristotelian view on character consists of three criteria:

> 1. *Consistency*. Character traits reveal themselves in trait-relevant behavior whenever the subject finds himself in a trait-eliciting condition.
> 2. *Stability*. We can rely on the occurrence of a character trait in different situations.
> 3. *Evaluative integration*. Whenever a personality consists of a trait, it will also consist of traits with similar psychological value (positive or negative). (Doris 2002, 22)

Whenever a person with a certain character trait finds himself in a situation where this trait is relevant, the trait will be 'active'; we rely on our knowledge of someone's character traits to predict how he will act in a trait-relevant situation. In summation, we expect *consistency* in someone's behavior. Yet, situations often differ from each other. According to the globalist view, this should not make a difference. The honest person is honest whenever he can and should be, whether at home or in court. A character trait thus shows *cross-situational stability* (Doris 1998, 507). Finally, the last criterion of the globalist view consists of a form of holism: each character trait is in line with the positive or negative psychological value of other traits—an honest person is more likely to also be compassionate than cruel. Doris (2002, 24-5) criticizes all three criteria of the globalist or virtue ethical view on character.

Instead of relying on character traits to predict someone's behavior, Doris (2002, 24) claims that we make a safer prediction by claiming that a person will do what most people would do in that situation. His claim can be supported by the Milgram experiment, explained in §2.2. The Milgram experiment shows a clear similarity between the behavior of the subjects; *all of them* shocked the accomplice until the three hundred volts mark, at which point the accomplice started kicking the

wall (although five subjects stopped directly after that). However, the experimenters did not expect this to happen. In fact, they predicted that almost everyone would stop at the hundred and fifty volts mark. In this instance, the experimenters' expectations of character-trait consistency were not met. A possible explanation could be that most, if not all, of the subjects had a character defect, but this seems unlikely (Harman 1999, 322). A more likely explanation seems to be that the external or situational factors played a far bigger role in influencing the decisions of the subjects than their character traits did. Milgram's other finding also supports this explanation. As Milgram explains, the subjects seemed to show "extraordinary tension generated by the procedures" (1963, 377). This indicates that subjects acted against their own (moral) feelings, character traits, and possibly their conscience, but continued to follow the instructions despite their feelings. It seems that the situational factors trumped the character (traits) of the subjects. Doris therefore concludes that the empirical evidence does not support the globalist first criterion of consistency: character traits do not reveal themselves in every trait-eliciting condition.

Doris does not reject the second criterion (stability). Instead he narrows its scope. He argues against the existence of what he calls *robust* character traits, or traits that are "substantially resistant to contrary situational pressures" (1998, 506). Doris thus argues against our common view on character traits. He claims that our character traits are not a stable foundation of our behavior that ensures that we will act according to our character traits, despite the situation we find ourselves in. In other words, Doris argues against our common view that if we are honest (i.e. if we possess the character trait of honesty) we will act honestly in most situations; at home, at work, under oath etc.

However, this poses a problem; if we are influenced by situational factors and we do not have some stable foundation that influences our behavior, we cannot predict how people will behave *at all*. In a way, our behavior becomes arbitrary; we react to (a mix of) situational factors. Doris agrees that this behavioristic view—in which people simply react to stimuli—does not agree with the daily reality we see all around us. People *do* show stability in their behavior, but this stability is much more narrow than our common or Aristotelian understanding of character traits and virtues. According to Aristotle, a virtuous agent will act from his stable/firm and unchangeable character. This implies that our character traits or our dispositions will express themselves whenever the relevant features are present, but Doris thinks this understanding of our character traits is too broad (hence the word 'global').

Doris therefore argues for the existence of *local traits* (Doris 2002, 25, 62-6). Unlike global or robust traits, local traits are (more) situation specific or

contextualized (Doris 2002, 64). A local trait is stable in the sense that it shows in specific situations or contexts. Doris explains his local trait theory with a study by Hartshorne and May (1928, as explained by Doris 2002, 64), in which they measured the cheating behavior of schoolchildren. They found that there was no strong correlation between one form of cheating and another form of cheating. For example, children would cheat by copying the answer key, but they would continue after the test was done. According to Doris, this experiment seems to suggest that the children's cheating behavior was stable in the sense that it was a *specific* kind of cheating (copying the answer key), but the trait was not global in that the children cheated any way they could. Doris therefore suggests that a view of local character traits that are consistent only in certain contexts is more (empirically) adequate than a view of global character traits where traits are (substantially) resistant to external situational features.

Closely related to the idea of local character traits is Doris' rejection of the third criterion of the globalist view: evaluative integration. The existence of local traits would mean that someone's character cannot be seen as a sort of integrated whole that consists of either positive or negative traits. In fact, if someone possesses a local trait, he could even show inconsistent behavior within the realm of that specific trait. As the results of the Hartshorne and May cheating experiment seem to show; most children cheated in one way but not in another. If we look at someone's character as a whole, we can see the same picture emerge; someone could have the positive local trait of 'compassion at home', while also having the negative local trait of being 'cruel to animals at the shelter'. According to Doris, this fragmentation of someone's character is a view on character that the globalist cannot accept. He argues that the third criterion of the globalist view on character—evaluative integration—prohibits the possibility of a character that is fragmented. Doris explains that, according to his view on globalism, a character consisting of traits of a psychological positive value will not also traits that have a negative psychological value. However, the empirical evidence does seem to suggest that our character is fragmented. As Doris explains, our character consists of traits that are more fine-grained than the traditional traits such as honesty, compassion, cruelty, etc. The consequence of this view on character is that there is more variability possible in one character; someone can be honest at home but not honest at work. A character can therefore consist of both psychologically positive and negative traits. The Good Samaritan experiment, for example, can be interpreted as proof of the existence of local helping traits that are account for a fragmented character. As Darley and Batson (1973, 108) explain, it can be concluded for some subjects that they willingly *decided* not to help the person in need because they were prone to help the

experimenter instead of a person in need. Following Doris' reasoning on local traits and the fragmentation of our character, this can be explained as follows; some of the subjects had the local character trait of helping an authority figure, but not the trait of helping someone in need. Their character traits were thus local, and their fragmented, consisting of positive psychological value (helping an authority figure) and psychological negative value (not helping someone in need). Their character was therefore *fragmented*, unlike the globalist view of a character that is evaluatively integrated (Doris 1998, 508; 2002, 62-66).

In summation, Doris supports a view on moral behavior where behavior is not consistent, but highly influenced by (morally irrelevant) external situational factors. Character traits are not robust and cross-situationally consistent, but local and situation-specific. Also, the character of a person is fragmented instead of integrated. Therefore, instead of depending on the character traits of a person to predict and explain their behavior, we should look at the situational factors. Based on these findings, Doris concludes that situationism offers a better psychological foundation for normative thought than virtue ethics. In §2.5 I will discuss in more detail how, according to Doris, situationism offers better psychological foundation for normative thought.

2.4 Situationists on Moral Reasoning and Practical Wisdom

According to the situationists, the results of different psychological experiments do not only suggest that the globalist or Aristotelian conception of character is empirically inadequate; they also question the empirical adequacy of the Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom.

As I have previously explained, the subjects of the Milgram experiment and the Good Samaritan experiment seemed to act against the moral norms we can reasonably expect people to hold. Milgram writes that subjects showed great distress in the form of sweating, stuttering, and nervous laughter, yet they kept on shocking the innocent learner. From the seminary students we can expect that they held the moral norm of helping a person in need, yet most of them walked right past a person who actually seemed in need of help. According to Merritt, Doris and Harman (2010), these observations (and others) suggest that the subjects' behavior was contrary to the moral norms they endorsed.

Merritt, Doris, and Harman call this phenomenon of 'acting against your moral norms' *moral dissociation* (2010, 363). They explain it as "the divergence between subject's morally important behavior in the situations of interest, and the moral values that subjects endorse (or would endorse) under reflection" (Merritt,

Doris, and Harman 2010, footnote 16). In other words, moral dissociation is a term to describe the phenomenon where people find themselves in a certain situation in which they, all things considered, should act according to a moral norm they hold, but they actually act contrary to it.

According to Merritt, Doris, and Harman (2010, 372-3), moral dissociation comes about because of the way our moral reasoning (or lack thereof) functions. Instead of the philosophical (or Aristotelian) view of practical reasoning as conscious and reflective deliberation, they claim that most of the processes that determine our behavior are actually automatic and unreflective, which results in behavior that is morally dissociated from the moral norms we endorse.

To better understand Merritt, Doris, and Harman's view on practical reasoning and moral dissociation we have to look at their explanation of the automaticity and unreflectiveness of our cognitive processes. According to them, the majority of our cognitive processes are "substantially automatic" (2010, 373). In contrast to the cognitive processes we control, these automatic processes are "effortless, efficient, and capable of occurring in parallel with other (sometimes more controlled) processes" (372). To illustrate the automaticity of our cognitive processes, consider the following example: imagine that you are discussing a problem with a friend. You are actively thinking of the different aspects of the problem and how to formulate them. Yet, all the while you are also drinking your tea and after some time you even catch yourself thinking of the groceries you need to get after the conversation (372-3). This example is meant to illustrate how multiple different cognitive processes can be active at the same time. Some of them are mostly automatic; others are (more) under our control. The main point of Merritt, Doris, and Harman, is that the cognitive processes that *influence our behavior* are substantially automatic (373), which stands in contrast to the philosophical (or Aristotelian) view of moral reasoning as conscious reasoning.

Merritt, Doris, and Harman also argue that these processes are to a large extent unreflective. To support this, they refer, among other experiments, to a study of Latané and Darley on the influence of bystanders on our behavior (Latané and Darley 1969, as explained by Merritt, Doris, and Harman 2010, 373). The results of the experiment show that an individual's helpful behavior decreased as the amount of bystanders increased; the more bystanders there were, the less likely it was for an individual to offer help. What is interesting here, and important for Merritt, Doris, and Harman's claim of the existence of moral dissociation, is that when the experimenters asked the subjects during the debriefing if and how the amount of bystanders influenced their behavior, the subjects claimed that it did not influence their behavior at all. The data and observations from the experimenters, however,

clearly showed that the amount of bystanders was a large influence on the behavior of the subjects. This, in turn, indicates that the subjects were unable to effectively reflect on what factors influenced their behavior. The amount of bystanders seemed to not cross their mind, even when the experimenters explicitly asked the subjects about it during the debriefing. This indicates, according to Merritt, Doris, and Harman, that there is a gap between "the reflective understanding" of an agent and the "determinative stimuli" (373) of his behavior, and that the cognitive processes that determine our behavior are highly resistant to introspection.

Merritt, Doris, and Harman conclude, based on their 'automaticity' argument and their claim that the cognitive processes that influence our behavior are resistant to introspection, that:

> The cognitive processes apparently at work in classic experimental observations of moral dissociation do not bear much resemblance to the philosophical models of reflective deliberation or practical reasoning, processes expected to be governed, to a considerable extent, by the actor's evaluative commitments […] instead the determinative cognitive processes occur unreflectively and automatically, cued by morally arbitrary situational factors. (Merritt, Doris, and Harman 2010, 387)

Merritt, Doris, and Harman thus claim to refute the philosophical and common view on moral deliberation and moral judgment. In the next section (§2.5) I will discuss how this conclusion is used to formulate an alternative to this philosophical view on moral deliberation.

For now, it is important to note that this conclusion poses a problem for the Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom. According to Merritt, Doris, and Harman, the Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom lacks empirical adequacy. The cognitive processes that determine our behavior do not resemble the philosophical model of conscious reasoning and deliberation, but are instead automatic and unreflective. The consequence of this conclusion is that we cannot 'train' the cognitive processes that determine our behavior in a *substantive* way (Merritt, Doris, and Harman 2010, 388). The ideal of practical wisdom is therefore empirically inadequate and the virtue ethicists face the problem of whether they are not asking or expecting too much from people.

As a 'remedial measure', Merritt, Doris, and Harman propose that we create and sustain social contexts that are likely to activate "automatically the desired aspects of moral cognition, and likely to channel them in the desired directions"

(Merritt, Doris, and Harman 2010, 389). We should, for example, pick social context where the presence of other people (for example friends or colleagues) will prevent us from acting in a morally undesirable way. They reason that if we get in the same social contexts over and over again, we create a consistency in our behavior that is specific to the situation. This 'training' of our automatic reactions could fall in line with the virtue ethical habituation of our dispositions, but it would be situation specific (ibid.), much like Doris' account of local traits; dispositions to act in a stable an consistent way in certain contexts. Unfortunately, Merritt, Doris, and Harman do not give a detailed account of how we can create these social contexts.

In summation, Merritt, Doris, and Harman argue against Aristotelian practical wisdom based on the results of experiments in psychology. Aristotle explains practical wisdom as "a true and *reasoned* state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good and bad for man" (*NE*.VI.1140b4-5, my italics). Taylor (2008, 220) explains that practical wisdom is our *informed* judgment that helps us decide the mean in a situation, makes us aware of the relevant moral features, and 'guides' us towards our goal of happiness. Merritt, Doris, and Harman argue against this informed and reasoned moral deliberation, claiming that the cognitive processes that influence our behavior are both substantially automatic and unreflective. Their view on moral deliberation therefore deviates substantially from the Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom.

2.5 Situationists' Alternatives to the Virtue Ethical view on Character and Practical Wisdom

So far, the situationist thesis has left us with a gloomy prospect. We have found that, according to Doris, the globalist or virtue ethical view on character does not comply with the empirical evidence, and that the character traits that *do* exist are only local. We have also seen that the empirical evidence could refute the possibility of practical wisdom. According to Merritt, Doris, and Harman, most of the cognitive processes that influence our behavior are automatic and are not in line with our moral beliefs or dispositions. Based on these conclusions, Merritt, Doris, and Harman (2010) and Doris (2002) propose certain revisions to form a more empirically adequate account of our moral decision-making process and our moral evaluation. Doris claims that if we take the situationist conclusions at heart, we would not evaluate people in terms of robust character traits because they are "unreasonable standards to expect actual persons to approximate" (Doris 1998, 514). Doris uses Bernard Williams' 'thick' and 'thin' concepts (Williams [1985] 2006, 140-2) to explain that the characterological language we use is not only non-evaluative but also evaluative. As Doris interprets

Williams, a thick concept (such as 'courageous' and 'honest') has both an evaluative and non-evaluative aspect. A thin concept is only evaluative, such as 'goodness' or 'rightness' (Kirchin 2013, 5126).

According to Doris, the problem with wielding thick concepts with virtue ethical connotations is that they raise expectations that are too high. By avoiding the use of robust character traits to evaluate someone's behavior, we can create a more empirically adequate evaluative language. We could, for example, use a language of local character traits to evaluate someone's behavior. This way, we still use thick concepts, but these will be more empirically adequate. Doris recognizes that our evaluative language can become unusable if we use thick concepts like "dime-finding-dropped-paper compassionate" (Doris 2002, 115). He therefore explains that we can use thick ethical concepts, like 'honest', in specific situations without risking expecting an unreasonable standard of behavior. We could, for example, call our mechanic an honest mechanic because he does not lie about the cost of fixing our car. According to Doris, the evaluative thick concept 'honest' in this example has such a narrow meaning that it does not implicate honesty in other aspects of the mechanic's life. The point, according to Doris, is that we should stop using thick virtue ethical concepts because their empirical inadequacy often leads to "unfair condemnations, on the one hand, and unwarranted approbation, on the other" (Doris 2002, 116).

The second situationist revision is proposed by Merritt, Doris, and Harman (2010, 389-390) as well as Doris (2002, 146). To satisfy the situationist critique, we should redirect our ethical attention. Instead of trying to develop robust character traits to determine our behavior, we should pay more attention to the influence of situational features. We should also try to create recurring social contexts, while avoiding situations that can inhibit unwanted moral behavior. Doris (2002, 146) explains that instead of trying to develop robust character traits, we would do well to spend more of our energy in addressing the relevant situational features and their influence. If we really want our behavior to be morally desirable, we should avoid morally dubious situations where there is a large risk of 'sinning'. In 'cold' situations—i.e. situations that are not morally trying because of the situational factors—we should take our time to think about the morally 'hot' (or dubious) situation that lies ahead. For when we find ourselves in a 'hot' situation, our moral deliberation will be both automatic and unreflective, whereas a 'cold' situation gives us the opportunity to look at a 'hot' situation from all angles. Here we have the opportunity, according to Doris, to reflect on how we should act, while in the hot situation we will not have a possibility to reflect because of the (often unrecognized) situational influences.

2.6 The Scope of Situationism

A final important aspect of situationism is its scope. In this section I want to explicate Doris' view on the scope of his (and most situationists') claims.

According to Doris, the claims he makes are about *moral psychology*, which is empirical, or as Doris calls it: practical. He opposes these 'practical' claims to ethical claims, which are claims about value and moral conduct (Doris 2002, 108). Doris calls his situationist account *conservatively revisionary*, because he only problematizes those features of ethical thought that are associated with characterological moral psychology, but he refrains from discussing what values we *should* hold (2002, 108). In other words, his claims stay mostly on the empirical or practical side of ethical theories; he challenges the, in his eyes, inadequate moral psychologies of ethical theories, but he does not challenge the values or norms these ethical theories advocate.

Underlying this difference between 'practical' moral psychology and 'theoretical' ethical theory is Doris' view on the scope of each of these 'domains'. According to Doris, the (conclusions from the) theoretical discussions seldom show up in our prescriptions on how to act in particular situations, because they are too general (Doris 2002, 109). Imperatives, virtues, etc. are often hard to use as guidelines in particular situations because they do not account for the individual features of each situation that differentiate one situation from the other. Contrary to these general theoretical discussions and conclusions, the situationists' 'practical' moral psychology tells us something about how we make our decisions, and is therefore better able to help us judge and act better, for it explains why we do what we do. This, in turn, can be used as a 'manual' for future moral situations, despite any ongoing 'theoretical' discussion on values. In other words, Doris distinguishes between the ethical discussion on values that should inform our conduct but is too general to have real practical use in specific situations, and the moral psychological discussion on how we act and why, which can better inform our conduct in particular cases.

Doris writes that this is not to say that the theoretical discussion on the kind of values we should hold have no use at all, or that these 'domains' are strictly separated. According to him, these ethical 'theoretical' discussions "may be important in their own right, and they may sometimes show up in the form of substantive disagreement on cases" (2002, 109). However, Doris leaves it there and he does not go into detail on how these discussions can be important in their own right. At the same time, Doris is well aware that the discussions on our moral psychology and on the values we should hold are interdependent and that they

influence each other. Moral psychological theories, for example, can inform the kind of values we should realistically be able to hold.

The difference between psychological views on moral psychology and philosophical ethical thought is one I will explain in more detail in chapter 4. The purpose of this section was to explain the scope of situationism. More specifically; the scope of situationism as Doris understands it, because his view has consequences for virtue ethics. As we saw in chapter 1, in virtue ethics the 'theoretical' discussion on values and moral conduct is heavily interwoven with the 'practical' discussion of our moral psychology. However, if the moral psychology that virtue ethics presupposes does not accommodate the ethical values and behavior it prescribes (as Doris claims it does not), a gap appears between the kind of behavior we expect and want, and the kind of behavior that is possible for human beings. A gap that, according to Doris, can be filled by formulating a more empirically adequate moral psychology: the situationists' moral psychology.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to answer the following sub-question:

What does situationism entail,
and what is the situationists' critique on virtue ethics?

Based on the results of different empirical psychological experiments—two of which I discussed in §2.2—Doris and other situationists argue against both the existence and influence of the virtue ethical character traits and virtues (§2.3), as well as the concept of practical wisdom or conscious moral reasoning in specific situations (§2.4). Instead, Doris and the situationists argue for what they call an empirically adequate moral psychology where (morally irrelevant) external situational factors are the main influence on our behavior, and where most of our moral reasoning is the result of automatic and unreflective cognitive processes.

In §2.5 I discussed the alternative Doris, as well as Merritt, Doris, and Harman, offer that is, as they claim, empirically more adequate. First, we must get rid of thick ethical concepts with virtue ethical connotations in our evaluative language to prevent expectations on moral behavior to be too high. Second, we must redirect our ethical attention to the influence of external situational factors to reflect on any oncoming morally trying situations before we find ourselves in these situations.

Finally, in §2.6, I discussed the scope of situationism. According to Doris, the scope of situationism is mostly 'practical'—i.e. aimed at the moral psychology of an ethical theory. He opposes this 'practical domain' with a more theoretical 'ethical domain' that discusses the kind of moral values we should hold. Doris claims that the situationists offer a moral psychology that is empirically adequate and that can help people judge and act better in particular situations.

The answer to the sub-question can therefore be summarized as follows: philosophical situationism is an approach where certain philosophers—known as situationists—use results from psychological experiments to criticize the existence or influence of the virtue ethical concepts of character, virtue, and practical wisdom. Instead, situationists argue that external situational factors are the main influence on our behavior and decision-making, and claim that an understanding of these influences can better guide our judgment and behavior than virtue ethics can.

In the next chapter, I will turn to two virtue ethical strategies to reply to situationism. The first is a line of reply that defends virtue ethics on methodological grounds, the second is a line that defends virtue ethics on conceptual grounds. I will also discuss the third and final position in the person-situation debate: a reconciliatory position.

Chapter 3
Different Strategies to Reply To Situationism

We can distinguish three different positions in the philosophical person-situation debate: 1) a defense of virtue ethics that rejects the situationists' critique, 2) an acknowledgement of the situationists' critique and a rejection of the virtue ethical moral psychology, and 3) an alternative that combines the two earlier positions into one 'hybrid' or reconciliatory position.

In chapter 1, I explained the Aristotelian/virtue ethical view on virtue ethics and character. In the previous chapter, chapter 2, I explained the arguments used by the situationists to argue against virtue ethics. In this chapter, I want to discuss different strategies to reply to situationism by answering the following sub-question:

What strategies are used to reply to situationism?

The virtue ethical replies to situationism can be divided into two (general) strategies: a methodological and a conceptual critique on situationism. I will discuss these strategies in §3.1.1 and §3.1.2. After discussing these virtue ethical strategies I will have discussed the first two positions in the person-situation debate (the virtue ethical and the situationist position). I will discuss the third position, the reconciliatory position, in §3.2.

My aim in this chapter is to illustrate the *type of arguments* that are used by the different positions in the person-situation debate. My discussion will therefore not consist of all the different arguments used by each position. This is especially important to remember in §3.2, because the reconciliatory position can range from variations of either virtue ethics (Thomson 1997) or situationism (Merritt 2000), to more divergent approaches that claim to be new positions altogether. I, however, will discuss an approach by Christian Miller called the 'Mixed Trait Theory' to illustrate what a reconciliatory position in the person-situation debate looks like.

I will end this chapter with a conclusion in which I will answer my sub-question.

3.1.1 Methodological Strategy

The claims of Doris and the situationists have provoked modern virtue ethical philosophers. These reactions can typically be divided into two sorts: those who focus on questions about the situationists' methodology, and those who focus on the situationists' understanding and depiction of the Aristotelian concept of character. In this section I will discuss the methodological reply, which I divided into two main points: questions on how to interpret the data, and questions on the limits of what is being measured in the different experiments.

First Methodological Reply: How to Interpret the Data

Sabini and Silver (2005) refer to the same experiment performed by Hartshorne and May (1928) as Doris. As I explained in §2.3 ('character'), Hartshorne and May measured the cheating behavior of schoolchildren. They found that there was no strong correlation between one form of cheating and another. For example, children would cheat by copying the answer key, but would not cheat by continuing to write after the time limit for taking the test was up. The conclusion Doris draws from this experiment is that his experiment proved that the view of robust character traits should be replaced by local character traits. Sabini and Silver, however, form a different argument.

During the experiment, Hartshorne and May measured the cheating behavior of schoolchildren and found that there was no strong correlation between one form of cheating and another form. They also noted that their display of honest behavior between circumstances showed little correlation; most of the children cheated some of the time, and (almost) none cheated all of the time or none of the time. These findings are in accordance with a standard idea that the correlation from one situation to another in the personality domain rarely exceeds .3, and most of the time is closer to .2[14] (Sabini & Silver 2005, 540). From these findings, Doris and other situationists conclude that there is no consistent behavior across situations. Yet, instead of interpreting this correlation as affirming the situationists' claim, we can also conclude that there *is* a correlation since no one will claim that the correlation is zero. The question thus becomes: is a .3 or .2 correlation really that small when we consider what we are researching? Sabini and Silver claim that these correlations are probably not too small at all. Using a baseball example (the batting average of two

[14] A correlation is a statistical technique to determine to which degree two variables are related. It ranges from -1.00 to +1.00 (Pearson Product Moment Correlation). When it is +1.00, the correlation is perfect. This means that when one variable increases, the other does so to. A .2 or .3 correlation is therefore a low correlation, and can be translated as: when the honesty disposition we ascribe to someone is high, his behavior still varies. ("Lesson 6. Correlation" 2015)

hitters), they show that these correlations have predictive power in the long run, though not with specific situations. Looking at the short term, people usually overestimate the consistency of human behavior, just as they overestimate the consistency of a hitter in Major League Baseball; however, in the long run consistency does reveal itself. The batting average of the hitter might not help to predict whether he will hit the next ball or not (short term), but it will help a scout to decide whether or not to recruit the hitter (long term). The same goes for trait consistency; it might not help to predict whether someone will be honest in the next trait relevant situation, but it will help to predict a trend of trait-relevant behavior.

More importantly, Sabini and Silver claim that "correlations from one situation to the next are only distantly related to what we really want to know" (Sabini & Silver 2005, 541). Therefore, what do we measure when we use correlations? What is being measured in an experiment like Hartshorne and May's honesty test is an apparent relation in an entire group of subjects. In this specific experiment, the correlation between the possession (or absence) of an honesty trait in different situations is measured. A +1.00 correlation means that both variables that are being measured change equally. However, this is not what we want to know from a virtue ethical perspective. We do not want to measure the entire group, but only those persons that are virtuous. As Sabini and Silver (2005, 543) explain: "that's how correlations work; they consider the consistency of the virtuous and the not virtuous together. But virtue ethics does not require that those without substantial virtue be consistent in their transgression." The relation we are looking for in these experiments is between virtue and virtue specific behavior.

If we look at the Good Samaritan experiment, we can also see how this critique applies here. In a way, we are forced to accept that seminary students that were in a high hurry situation helped less than students who were in a low hurry situation (ten percent versus sixty-three percent). However, from these facts the situationist concludes that character traits, as cross-situational and stable traits, do not exist. How do they account for the ten percent that *did* help, despite being in a hurry? Do the results here tell the entire story? Does the correlation between the hurry state of the student and his helping behavior really tell us that character traits do not exist, or do they only show that we expect too much from consistent behavior in relation to character traits? It appears that some people, although not many, do seem to behave in a way that we expect and this is something the situationist needs to be able to explain.

Second Methodological Reply: The Limits of the Experiments

A different methodological critique on situationism is that a correlation can be corrupted by many different factors. What we need is a better psychological explanation to really explain the relation between character traits and trait specific behavior: all that has been measured thus far is the relation between two variables, without looking at other possible variables or influences.[15] It could easily be the case that subjects have contradictory dispositions that are at work at the same time. Diana Fleming (2006, 39-41) explains how the situationist experiments miss some vital information. She writes that while it is true that the features of a situation influence our behavior, it is not possible to conclude from this that *only* these features cause our behavior, but this *is* the only thing that is being measured in these experiments. What is important to remember is that the way one looks at the world, or interprets a situation, shapes the influence and reaction he or she has to a specific situation. So what (at most) is measured in the Good Samaritan experiment is not that people do not have character traits, but that these traits are more situationally-sensitive than we have expected so far and more rare than we thought. However, this conclusion differs from Doris' conclusion because he claims that our character traits have no real influence at all. Fleming's claim is consistent with the claim Sabini and Silver make, that people usually overestimate how consistent human behavior is, and that a correlation of .2 or .3 seems sufficient to hold onto character traits, and it will also play a role in §3.2.

Consequences of the Methodological Critiques for Situationism

The virtue ethical methodological critiques could raise some fundamental (methodological) problems for the situationists. Firstly, there seems to be a correlation between personality traits and trait relevant behavior. Consistency is more likely to show itself over a longer period of time, but the situationists' experiments are all short-term experiments and are therefore not likely to show these correlations in their results. Secondly, the experiments are limited in a number of ways, two of which I discussed. On the one hand the situationists only look at behavior without looking at other possible (psychological or narrative) explanations. On the other hand, what is being measured is *a* correlation, which tells us that there is a relation between two variables, but not that one variable causes the other (which is something the situationists do imply).

[15] Andy Field (2013) explains that a problem with interpreting a correlation coefficient is that all we can conclude when we get a high (positive) correlation between two variables is that when one changes, the other does so, too. We cannot conclude from this that the one causes the other.

Since the situationists put great emphasis on the results of the psychological experiments and the implications drawn from them, these methodological critiques can be a fundamental blow to their position. If the validity of the experiments can be questioned, the main pillar on which situationism is built will crumble and situationists will have virtually no evidence to support their claims. The situationists will therefore either have to change their methodology to accommodate for these criticisms, or defend their methodology.

3.1.2 Conceptual Strategy

Besides the methodological strategy I just explained, there is a more distinctive virtue ethical strategy that uses the Aristotelian conceptual understanding of character and virtue to argue against situationism. This strategy focuses on the broadness and inclusiveness of the Aristotelian and virtue ethical conception of character and virtue, and opposes this more holistic understanding of character and virtue to the narrow interpretation of character by the situationists. The situationists' interpretation of character differs significantly from the virtue ethical interpretation of character and virtue. This strategy is therefore known as the 'anti-behavioristic' objection (Kristjánsson 2008, 67); it criticizes the narrow and almost behavioristic way—we always react in a stereotypical way to stimuli—the situationists interpret character. In this sub-section I will discuss two examples of this virtue ethical conceptual strategy: one by Rachana Kamtekar, and one by Jonathan Webber.

Inclusiveness of Aristotelian Character and Virtue

The main argument of the conceptual strategy is that Aristotelian character and virtue is more complex than what we measure in behavior; it consists, among other things, of what values we hold, how we perceive of the world, how we perceive of a situation, what our emotions are, and what our beliefs are (Kristjánsson 2008, 67). All these processes and factors cannot (always) be found in the kind of behavior we eventually show. Besides, philosophers that use this strategy argue that even if people do not behave virtuous, this does not mean that virtue does not exists. It means that we might be measuring the wrong way, or that virtue is something that is hard (or impossible) to measure.

Rachana Kamtekar (2004) claims that the situationists only perceive of character and character traits as "independently functioning dispositions to behave in stereotypical ways, dispositions that are isolated from how we reason" (Kamtekar 2004, 460). Kamtekar refers to the Milgram experiment to make her point; based on the behavior of the subjects the experimenters concluded that most people do not have the stable character trait of not hurting innocent people. They made these

conclusions through observing the behavior of the subjects. Yet, Milgram also noted that the subjects began to sweat and tremble during the experiment. This indicates that the subjects were undergoing some (mental and emotional) processes that influenced their behavior, and could even be part of their character, but that did not eventually show in their behavior. According to Kamtekar, this example from the Milgram experiment illustrates the problem with the situationists' view of character; they expect a character trait to manifest itself in a stereotypical way, without thinking of other psychological explanations that could also explain the behavior. In other words, "the character trait will determine behavior in isolation from other character traits, thoughts, concerns, and so forth [that] a person might have in a situation" (Kamtekar 2004, 474).

Aristotelian character and virtue, however, is more complex than what we measure in behavior; it consists, among other things, of what values we hold, how we perceive of the world, how we perceive of a situation, what our emotions are, and what our beliefs are (Kristjánsson 2008, 67). All these processes and factors cannot (always) be found in the kind of behavior we eventually show, which means that the situationists' experiments are, based on conceptual grounds, not equipped to measure virtue or Aristotelian character.

Stereotypical Reactions as Vices of Excess

Like Kamtekar, Jonathan Webber (2006) also argues against the one-sided account of character employed by the situationists, but from a different perspective. According to Webber, reacting in a stereotypical manner (as the situationists would expect to see) is what Aristotle would call vices of excess. Always speaking truthfully would not be virtuous, for it would collide with other expectations, dispositions, and virtues. Instead, a trait becomes a virtue when it is in line with the other dispositions. It is when we know when to act, how to act, towards whom to act, and why to act that we become truly virtuous. For Aristotle, there is "a single web of interdependent virtues: full possession of any one virtue means habitually being inclined to behave in a certain way with the right degree of strength in the presence of a certain situational feature, where what is right is relative to [the] strength of one's other habitual inclinations in response to other possible situational features" (Webber 2006, 206).

As Aristotle writes: "virtue […] is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e., the mean *relative to us*, this being *determined by reason*, and by that reason by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it" (*NE*.II.6.1106b36-1107a2, my italics). In other words, virtue consists of many different aspects, most of them relative to the agent. Reason, or practical wisdom,

helps us to define the mean and helps us to define how to act in our specific situation, based on our ultimate goal of happiness. Virtue is therefore neither a non-rational disposition nor only observable in one specific type of action. From a virtue ethical perspective, the virtuous person would know, due to his practical reasoning, how, why, and when to act. This means that *if* someone were virtuous, he would react differently in every situation because every situation demands a different reaction. All reactions, however, would be virtuous. This picture of virtuous and consistent behavior differs from the situationists' view on character as showing itself in stereotypical behavior.

Consequences of the Conceptual Critique for Situationism

Although this strategy is a conceptual one—it criticizes the situationists' conceptual understanding of Aristotelian character and virtue—the strength of the strategy consists of its methodological consequences. According to the virtue ethical understanding of virtues and character, our behavior *alone* does not show whether we are virtuous or not. We cannot conclude from only behavior and our expectations of behavior whether someone is virtuous. Instead, virtue ethicists look at the right *reaction*. For this, more than just looking at behavior is needed. We should not only examine our dispositions as part of a web of interrelated dispositions, but also as part of our thoughts, reasons, situational factors, beliefs, and values.

This poses a problem for the situationists' methodology; it demonstrates that it would be impossible to measure the virtue of any action or the virtuous state of any person by expecting characteristic behavior and by looking *only* at someone's behavior. Yet, the experimental results the situationists use to defend their position, are aimed (solely) at measuring behavior.

The situationists thus miss their mark of defeating virtue ethics because of their misinterpretation of Aristotelian virtue and character. It is questionable whether it is even possible to measure someone's state of virtue. This would require a long-term experiment, in which the subject's life would have to be recorded (his judgments, actions, beliefs, etc. would have to become apparent somehow), of which the subject would have to be unaware (like a version of *The Truman Show*), and which would, at the very least, be a breach of the subject's privacy.

3.2 Reconciliatory Position

So far I have discussed two virtue ethical strategies to defend the position that virtue ethics has the most plausible view on character, virtue, and moral cognition. There is, as I explained in the introduction of this chapter, also a third position in the person-situation debate: the reconciliatory position. As I explained, this position can take many different forms. To illustrate this position I will discuss a reconciliatory theory developed by Christian Miller, which he calls the 'Mixed Trait' theory. The aim of this discussion is to illustrate what a reconciliatory position in the debate looks like, and to assess whether a reconciliatory position like Miller's might solve both the virtue ethical and the situationist critiques.

Miller's position can be summarized as follows: like the situationists, Miller claims that (most) people do not possess the virtue ethical virtues or vices. However, unlike the situationists, and more like the virtue ethicists, Miller claims that (most) people *do* possess character traits. These character traits, however, do not resemble the kind of character traits in the way we commonly use the concept. Instead of global traits such as honesty or compassion that presuppose people to act in a characteristic way, we see in people's behavior traits that are much more complex and conflicted: at moment X a person might act in character and perform a compassionate deed, while at moment Y he might not, despite the lack of any explanation as to why. Miller therefore opts for a new concept, which he calls *Mixed Traits* (which he deliberately writes with capital letters to illustrate a new concept): traits that consist of both morally negative and positive features, and therefore resemble the kind of inconsistent behavior we see in the different experiments (Miller 2014, 43-6).

Miller starts with a psychological account of what it means to possess a virtue. He writes that in order for us to be attributed a specific virtue—for example compassion—we need to have the right "interrelated mental state dispositions to form particular beliefs and desires" (Miller 2014, 38). In other words, we have to be in the right state (have the right dispositions) before we can say that we are compassionate. It would not make any sense calling someone compassionate if he has the disposition to do cruel things or a disposition to desire to do cruel things.

Miller calls this 'right state' consisting of different dispositions the "minimal threshold" of a virtue (Miller 2014, 38). A minimal threshold consists of the minimal (mental/dispositional) requirements we have to meet in order for us to have a virtue. It is easy to illustrate this point: if someone believes lying is the right thing to do, or that by lying he will always get what he wants, we would not say that he meets the minimal threshold—the right mental state dispositions to form beliefs and desires—

for the virtue of honesty. On the contrary; the minimal threshold he meets is that of dishonesty! According to Miller, every virtue and vice has a minimal threshold; a specific state of different dispositions, to form beliefs and desires that are specific to that virtue or vice.

Miller's account of a minimal threshold for the possession of a virtue is important because it gives him the criteria to measure whether or not people generally possess the traditional virtues or vices. To put it crudely: if people meet the criteria of the minimal threshold of a virtue or vice, they have the virtue or vice related to these criteria. However, like the situationists, Miller argues (based on experiments like the Milgram experiment) that people generally do not possess the virtue ethical virtues and vices to any degree. In the Milgram experiment, for example, most people did not act either virtuously or viciously, but showed, as I discussed earlier, highly conflicted behavior where they shocked an innocent learner to death (if the experiment would be real) but were clearly conflicted about it (which indicates that they were not vicious people). Based on the Milgram experiment—and many other experiments—Miller therefore concludes that most people do not meet the minimal threshold to qualify for either the traditional virtues or vices to any degree. However, Miller does not deny that *some* people might qualify (Miller 2014, 43).

So far, Miller seems to be heading towards the same conclusions as the situationists. Miller claims that most people do not possess the traditional virtues or vices to any degree, the situationists deny that people possess virtue ethical or robust character traits. However, Miller does not want to go as far as the situationists to claim that people seem to 'lack character'. He therefore proposes his own moral psychological account to replace both the situationists' moral psychology, as well as the virtue ethical one.

Miller claims that people do possess character traits, and that these traits do pertain to the different moral domains (Miller 2014, 43). These traits, however, do not resemble our traditional concepts of virtue and vice. Take for example a character trait like aggression. In our 'traditional' understanding of aggression, someone needs be aggressive in a stable and consistent way; if the situation asks for it, a person with an aggressive character trait will most likely act aggressively. Miller replaces this traditional view on character traits with one he finds more empirically adequate: *Mixed Traits*. Unlike the moral virtues and vices, Mixed Traits consists of dispositions and beliefs that are both morally positive and morally negative. A 'Mixed Aggression Trait', for example, is not a form or degree of cruelty, but a complex framework of all kinds of mental state dispositions that are related to aggression. It consists of beliefs and desires related to kindness and non-

malevolence, but also cruelty and hostility. In short, a Mixed Trait is not mixed because it is sometimes virtuous and sometime vicious (to any degree), but because it is always neither virtuous nor vicious. According to Miller, these kinds of Mixed Traits make up our character (2014, 44-5).

Miller thus emphasizes the importance of a psychologically adequate picture to explain and predict people's behavior, and according to him, the virtue ethical view on virtues and vices is not adequate. Instead, he proposes his Mixed Trait theory to better explain and predict people's behavior. According to this view, people do not possess the traditional virtues or vices, but character traits that consist of both morally positive and negative features and are influenced by relevant stimuli. The best way to explain and predict a person's behavior is through a detailed analysis of his Mixed Traits (which consist of a complex network of interrelated mental state dispositions) and the psychological relevant features (i.e. the relevant feature for the subject) of a situation.

Miller in Relation to the Other Positions

The strength of Miller's argument is that he evades the virtue ethical conceptual and methodological critiques on situationism that I discussed in § 3.1 on conceptual grounds, while retaining the focus on the empirical adequacy of our moral psychology. To evade the virtue ethical critiques, Miller offers a more complex moral psychology that does not only focus on the output of behavior, but also on all the different elements that influence a person and form his moral psychology. For example, Miller claims that although some behavior might seem inconsistent to an experimenter (someone could be honest at moment X, and dishonest at moment Y), this behavior could be completely consistent in the eyes of the subject himself. The way the subject perceives of a situation could therefore better explain his behavior. By offering this specific (complex) moral psychology, Miller follows the virtue ethical picture of our character as being inclusive, but he retains the possibility of measuring what kind of character a person has by emphasizing that we should not only measure behavior, but also question the perception and motivation of a person. In short, Miller holds on to both the situationsists' reliance on measuring behavior, while accommodating for the virtue ethical conceptual and methodological critiques.

To illustrate the point, we can once again look at the Good Samaritan experiment. As I explained, most subjects walked right past the person in need. To an experimenter, the relevant feature of whether a subject would or would not help was the amount of hurry the subject was in. However, as I discussed in §2.2, when Darley and Batson asked the subjects why they did not help the person in need, some gave psychological reasons why they did not: they thought that helping the

experimenter was more important (Miller 2014, 53-6). This indicates that the way a person perceives a situation might tell us more about his behavior than just the clinical external factors will.

Still, Miller's Mixed Trait theory also knows a weak point; predicting someone's behavior becomes almost impossible because of the empirical requirements. Miller explains that the best way to predict someone's behavior is through a detailed analysis of his Mixed Traits and the psychological relevant features of a situation. However, there seems to be a (infinite) range of possible combinations of Mixed Traits, which, in turn, can differ among each other. On the level of the Mixed Trait, John can have a Mixed Aggression Trait that consists of a considerable high degree of the mental state dispositions of cruelty and hostility, and not so much of non-malevolence (although all of these mental state dispositions together make up the Mixed Aggression Trait). At the same time, Jane could also have a Mixed Aggression Trait that differs significantly from John's; her trait consists of all three of the mental state dispositions in equal degree. Both will react differently in the same situation. In other words, a Mixed Trait is too unclear a concept to help predict someone's behavior.

Behavior, however, is the product of someone's character as a whole, which in turn consists of the entire net of Mixed Traits someone has. So Jane might already react differently than John does because of a difference in the structure of their Mixed Trait, but she might also have a different character as a whole (consisting of different Mixed Traits), which will also explain why she reacts differently. And on top of this difference, there is a third difference; both John and Jane might experience a situation differently, which could lead to different behavior.

In short, if we want to get an accurate view of how someone will act, we will have to take in all these different factors, which will be time-consuming to say the least. On top of that, it will be very unpractical and not conducive for a theory on how we should act.

My discussion of Miller's theory does not do it justice, since it is more complex than I have been able to explain here. My point, however, was to show an alternative to the two earlier positions on character (the virtue ethical position and the situationist position) that tries to reconcile both positions into a new approach. Miller claims to have done this; his theory retains a focus on the empirically adequacy of our moral psychology (and thus follows the situationists), while at the same time accounting for a more complex and psychologically holistic understanding of character and character traits, and thus not getting rid of the concept of character.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to discuss the different lines of replies to situationism by answering the following sub-question:

What strategies are used to reply to situationism?

The virtue ethical reply to situationism generally comes in two kinds of strategies: a methodological strategy and a conceptual strategy. In §3.1.1 I discussed the methodological reply to situationism. The core of this strategy is twofold: on the one hand philosophers question how the results from the situationists' experiments should be interpreted. On the other hand they argue that the situationists' experiments are not equipped to measure virtue because they focus solely on situational influences and neglect the psychological, social, and emotional features that also play a role in our moral behavior. In §3.1.2 I discussed the virtue ethical conceptual strategy. Philosophers that use this strategy point to the inclusiveness of Aristotle's understanding of character, claiming that the situationists' understanding of character is too crude. Character entails more than just action or behavior, it requires the right *reaction*, which entails the use of reason and emotion, among other things. This conceptual reply has methodological consequences. If virtue and character consist of many different aspects—from character dispositions to external factors—then these should all be taken into account if we really want to measure the virtuous state of a person. However, we must seriously question whether this is even possible.

Finally, in §3.2, I discussed an example of the third position in the person-situation debate: the reconciliatory position. I discussed Miller's Mixed Trait theory. According to Miller, most people do not possess the traditional virtues or vices (although some might). Instead, people have what he calls 'Mixed Traits': character traits that consist of morally positive and negative features. With his Mixed Trait theory, Miller tries to take a middle position between situationism and virtue ethics. On the one hand he agrees with the situationists that the results from the psychological experiments do not support the virtue ethical characterological moral psychology. On the other hand, he agrees with the virtue ethicists that character is much more inclusive than the situationists interpret it: it consists of beliefs, emotions, the way a subjects looks at the world, etc.

The sub-question can thus be answered as follows: from a virtue ethical account, two strategies are used to reply to situationism: a methodological and a

conceptual strategy. Of these replies, as I explained in §3.1, the methodological strategy seems to be the most viable because it questions the foundation of situationism: the results from the psychological experiments. Another indication of why the methodological reply might be the most viable is that even the conceptual reply eventually has methodological consequences (be it on conceptual grounds); the situationists miss their mark of defeating virtue ethics because of their misinterpretation of character and character traits, and it is questionable whether it is even possible to measure someone's state of virtue since this would require a intensive long-term experiment that would intrude on the subjects' privacy.

Another reply to situationism comes from the third position in the person-situation debate: the reconciliatory position. Miller claims that his theory offers an advantage over both virtue ethics as well as situationism, because it offers an empirically adequate account of our moral psychology without losing the existence of character. It is true that this is the strength of this position, but Miller's Mixed Trait Theory also has a flaw: it becomes very difficult (maybe impossible) to predict how someone will act.

In the next chapter I will discuss what the consequences of the person-situation debate for virtue ethics are.

Chapter 4
Consequences of the Person-Situation Debate for Virtue Ethics

The previous chapters (especially chapter 3) should be enough to answer my research question ('how can Aristotelian virtue ethicists convincingly reply to the criticism of the situationists?'); I have discussed the virtue ethical replies and explained why they should be considered to be strong replies to situationism. I even discussed a third reconciliatory position as a reply to both situationism and virtue ethics. Still, an answer based on the first three chapters would be superficial because it would not lead us to the core of the debate.

It seems that, despite the methodological replies of the virtue ethicists, we should question whether it is even possible to be or become virtuous, because people generally do not seem to behave virtuously. To examine whether this is true I will answer the following sub-question:

Should the virtue ethical moral psychology be rejected based on the person-situation debate?

To answer my question I will start, in §4.1, with a discussion of Doris' view on the relation between ethics and psychology. Doris emphasizes that an ethical theory should be 'psychologically realistic'—a concept he borrows from Owen Flanagan (1991). In this first section I will discuss why Doris believes it important for an ethical theory to be psychologically realistic. In the next section, §4.2, I will examine Flanagan's own definition and explanation of the Principle of Minimal Psychological Realism (PMPR) to help judge whether Doris' critique on the psychological foundation of virtue ethics is well founded. In the following section, §4.3, I will review whether and to what extent virtue ethics violates PMPR, and judge to what extent Doris' critique against virtue ethics holds true. The situationists' critique, however, does not only concern our conception of character, but also our conception of practical wisdom. In §4.4 I will therefore question the strength of Merritt, Doris, and Harman's critique on practical wisdom by discussing contemporary literature to offer perspectives that are different from Merritt, Doris, and Harman's. My aim in this section is only to question the plausibility of their claim, not to offer a conclusive argumentation. If I can show that there is reason to question Merritt, Doris, and Harman's account this will be enough to open the door

for the possibility of practical wisdom, which is enough for my current purpose. I will end this chapter with a conclusion in which I will answer the sub-question.

It might be questioned why I focus on Doris and virtue ethics, and not on Miller's Mixed Trait theory and virtue ethics. I have decided to combine Doris and Miller because they both criticize virtue ethics' moral psychology based on the results of psychological experiments. This is not to imply that I think their positions are the same (the previous chapters should illustrate why), but in this case their critiques are similar which means that the virtue ethical reply will apply to both Doris and Miller.

4.1 Doris on Psychological Realism

In §2.6 I discussed the scope of Doris' (and the situationists') claims. Doris explains that his claims are limited to the moral psychological claims of ethical theories (and virtue ethics in particular), while leaving aside the ethical claims on what values we should have and what the human good is.

Doris has a specific view on the role of ethics. According to him, ethics is a practical undertaking that is aimed at securing morally desirable behavior (Doris 2002, 110). He claims that ethics is not a strictly theoretical practice, but one with practical implications. As he explains: "questions of conduct cannot be evaded. A practically relevant character ethics should have something to say about securing ethically desirable behavior" (ibid). From this view on ethics as a practical undertaking follows a specific view on the foundation of ethics. According to Doris, ethics should be founded upon what he calls 'psychological realism'[16] (Flanagan 1991), which, according to Doris, is the idea that "ethical reflection should be predicated on a moral psychology bearing a recognizable resemblance to actual human psychologies" (Doris 2002, 112). Even more specifically, Doris argues for a 'scientific psychological realism', by which he means that "a particular category of

[16] Owen Flanagan coins the concept 'psychological realism' in his work *Varieties of Moral Personality; Ethics and Psychological Realism*. However, the term 'realism' can be confusing to philosophers because it is commonly used as a meta-ethical concept that makes a claim about the existence of moral properties. According to a moral realist, moral propositions refer to moral truths that exist independently of human beings (Blackburn 2008, s.v. "realism"; Sayre-McCord 2015). As I will explain in §4.2, this meaning of realism does not apply to Doris' experimental psychological realism. Doris uses the term 'realism' in the sense that the psychological properties that are described by virtue ethics should exist in our common human psychology ('ought implies can'). In a sense, Doris uses the concept 'realism' to mean 'realistic', in that the moral psychology described by an ethical theory should be feasible for human beings.

putative psychological facts matter for ethics" (113). In short, ethics as a practical endeavor should be founded upon a moral psychology that is feasible for human beings. If people cannot become virtuous, there is no sense in prescribing them to be so.

Doris' use of psychological realism is important, especially because of the consequences this view has for the role of ethics. In Doris' view, ethics should secure morally desirable behavior. This means that it should be based on a moral psychological realism; people should be able to achieve the behavior that is prescribed to them by an ethical theory. In philosophy this view has also been summarized as 'ought implies can': an agent should be (psycho)logically capable of performing the kind of behavior that is prescribed to him by an ethical theory. For example, we cannot prescribe someone to understand his moral obligations from birth, for a baby is not capable of such understanding.

The problem with virtue ethics, according to Doris, is that it does not comply with the demands of psychological realism. It does not have a psychological realistic foundation and thus it creates expectations that cannot be met. In other words, Doris claims that the moral psychological picture that occurs from the behavior we measure does not accommodate the kind of behavior the virtue ethicists find morally desirable. According to Doris, the virtue ethicists are, in a way, too demanding in the kind of behavior they expect from human beings. Doris therefore proposes that we alter our moral psychological account to accommodate for the kind of behavior we measure, and that we alter our expectations to where we expect moral behavior that can be accommodated by our moral psychology.

To illustrate this point, let us look again at one of Doris' revisions, which I described in §2.5. Doris claims that we should be cautious in applying 'thick' ethical concepts with virtue ethical connotations. According to Doris, these thick concepts consist of both an evaluative and a non-evaluative part. If we call someone courageous, we do not only describe the kind of acts he performs (non-evaluative), but we also imply that we approve of these acts (evaluative). We presuppose a certain behavior of people we call courageous, which is the problem Doris has with virtue ethics. According to Doris, virtue ethics sets expectations that cannot be met because of the limits of our human psychology. Instead, Doris proposes that we replace these virtue ethical thick concepts with thick concepts that are more empirically adequate, such as local character traits. This does not only alter how we evaluate people's behavior, but it also alters the kind of behavior we prescribe.

Doris thus offers a very specific view on the relation between moral psychology and ethics, or, in other words, between the kind of behavior we measure and the picture that arises from these measurements, and the kind of behavior we

find desirable and therefore prescribe to people. According to Doris, the kind of behavior we measure shows us a picture of our moral psychology, and this picture should guide the kind of behavior we expect of people, and the kind of behavior we find morally desirable. These expectations should be realistic. This view is comparable with Miller's 'minimal threshold'; there are certain requirements someone should meet to have a certain trait, and these requirements can be measured. From these requirements, an image of our moral psychology occurs, and what we expect of someone should be accommodated by that image.

As I explained in §2.6, Doris is aware of the difference between psychology and ethics. He summarizes this difference in the phrase "ethics must not be psychology" (Doris 2002, 113), by which he means that there is a difference between 'fact' (psychology and the behavior we measure) and 'value' (ethics and the kind of values we hold). Doris uses this phrase—'ethics must not be psychology'—to explain that psychological facts cannot, on their own, establish ethical conclusions because the domains of psychology and ethics differ. Doris claims that this does not mean that ethics should not have anything to do with psychology. In fact, Doris' main claim is that psychological results can be, and are, relevant to the moral psychological claims of ethical theories, and they may even help to alter the kind of behavior we prescribe to and expect of others (ibid.). Thus, for Doris, an adequate psychological account should guide our ethical views in the sense that whatever we expect of a human being should be within its powers: ought implies can.

4.2 The Principle of Minimal Psychological Realism

Doris' critique on virtue ethics as grounded on a flawed moral psychology is based on his understanding of Flanagan's concept of psychological realism. I therefore want to explore the concept of psychological realism to examine whether Doris' understanding of the concept is similar to Flanagan's definition and explanation of it. A better understanding of the concept will also help to judge whether Doris' critique on the psychological foundation of virtue ethics is well founded.

Flanagan explains that he wants to give a defense of psychological realism, which means that he wants to give "an argument for constraining ethical theory by what psychology has to say about the architecture of cognition, the structure of the self, the nature and situation sensitivity of traits and dispositions, and the actual processes governing moral development" (Flanagan 1991, 15). Flanagan defines the minimal requirement for an ethical theory, which he calls 'the principle of minimal psychological realism' (PMPR), as follows:

> Make sure when constructing a moral theory or projecting a moral ideal that the character, decision processing, and behavior described are possible, or perceived to be possible, for creatures like us. (Flanagan 1991, 32)

This definition shows that, according to Flanagan, an ethical theory should, at the very least, be possible or perceived possible for creatures like us. In other words, and as Doris also claims, we should construct moral theories that take into account the psychological restrictions of human beings.

Yet, Flanagan explains that the PMPR is a *minimal requirement*, one that rules out very little:

> The Principle of Minimal Psychological Realism tells us that we ought to treat what is possible for persons as a constraint on our normative standards [that is, the morally desirable behavior we expect and prescribe]. But PMPR does *not* demand that the character and motivational structure required by an acceptable ethical theory must now be realized, or have once been realized, or be realized on average in actual persons. PMPR requires only that the recommended ideals be possible under some conceivable social arrangement or other. (Flanagan 1991, 201)[17]

This passage is important for the person-situation debate because in this passage, Flanagan emphasizes the (limited) scope of PMPR. As the passage shows, PMPR only gives as a *minimal requirement* that an ethical theory should consider the restraints of being human, and therefore should not expect behavior that is humanly impossible. However, this does not mean that the behavior prescribed by an ethical theory should "now be realized, or once have been realized, or been realized on average in actual persons" (201). Especially the last part of this sentence—'been realized on average in actual persons'—questions Miller's claim that 'most people do not possess the traditional virtues or vices', as well as Doris' emphasis on measuring behavior. Apparently, the fact that most people do not possess the character traits virtue ethics prescribes does not mean that the characterological view of virtue ethics is inadequate. In other words, PMPR does not reject an ethical theory of which we have not yet measured that it has been realized; it only rejects an ethical theory that is not (conceived to be) humanly possible.

[17] See also Thomas 1991, 121.

To illustrate his position, Flanagan gives a virtue ethical example that violates PMPR. According to Flanagan, a theory that requires a morally excellent person to possess *all* the virtues violates PMPR for two reasons. First, there is no list of all the virtues possible and therefore we cannot (with certainty) claim that someone possess all the virtues. Second, the idea of some possessing all the virtues is incoherent and would be contradictory; different virtuous people have different virtuous, but no one is capable of having all the virtuous because some virtues rule each other out (Flanagan 1991, 33).

In short, PMPR limits an ethical theory only to the extent that the character and motivational structure that is prescribed should be *at least* perceived possible for human beings. This restriction is very limited and does not demand that this character and motivational structure is (on average) realized in actual persons. This, in turn, implies that the lack of measurement of virtuous behavior does not render virtue ethics psychologically impossible. Yet, the lack of measurable virtuous behavior is one of the main arguments of both Doris and Miller. Flanagan's explanation of PMPR is thus important for the person-situation debate because it shows that the lack of measured virtuous behavior or robust character traits is not yet proof of the impossibility of the virtue ethical ideal.

4.3 Psychological Realism and Virtue Ethics

Considering what has been written on PMPR so far, the question becomes whether Doris and Miller's use of psychological experiments is enough to claim that the moral psychological foundation of virtue ethics is not humanly possible *at all*. And if this is so, whether this means that virtue ethics loses its practicality because it prescribes and expects behavior that is not possible for human beings.

This question has already been partly answered in the previous chapter (see §3.1). Especially on methodological grounds, virtue ethicists question whether the psychological experiments succeed in showing that it is impossible to have a character as described by Aristotle. That is; a holistic understanding of character consisting of global and robust character traits, beliefs, desires, emotions, and situational factors. This, in turn, questions whether virtue ethics' ideals really are empirically impossible; if character in the Aristotelian sense is (perceived) possible, than the ideals that come with it are also possible, for they are built upon an understanding of this characterological moral psychology.

Furthermore, if we take Flanagan's explanation of PMPR into account, virtue ethics does not seem to violate it. As Flanagan explains, the scope of PMPR is limited, and it does not demand that an ethical theory must now be realized, or have

once been realized, or that it is realized on average in actual persons. It only needs to be conceivable under some social arrangement. It appears that this is in line with the virtue ethical view on character, and especially the view on virtue. As Aristotle writes, the virtue ethical ideal of becoming a virtuous person is difficult (but not impossible) to achieve:

> It is possible to fail in many ways (for evil belongs to the class of the unlimited, as the Pythagoreans conjectured, and good to that of the limited), while to succeed is possible only in one way (for which reason one is easy and the other difficult—to miss the mark easy, to hit it difficult). (*NE*.II.6.1106b29-34)

> Hence also it is no easy task to be good. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle, e.g. to find the middle of a circle is not for everyone but for him who knows; so, too, anyone can get angry—this is easy—or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, *that* is not for everyone, nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble. (*NE*.II.9.1109a24-9)

> For of the extremes one is more erroneous, one less so; therefore, since to hit the intermediate is hard in the extreme, we must as a second best, as people say, take the least of evils; and this will be done best in the way we describe. (*NE*.II.9.1109a31-4)

> But this is no doubt difficult, and especially in individual cases; for it is not easy to determine both how and with whom and on what provocation and how long one should be angry… (*NE*.II.9.1109b14-8)

As the passages show, being virtuous requires 'hitting the mark' on how, to what extent, and towards whom to act. It requires not only the right dispositions, but also reason: to find the middle is only for him who *knows*. Virtue, or being virtuous, is thus very hard to achieve. This, however, is not to say that the ideal is impossible.

The point made here is that the situationists' and Miller's emphasis on measurable behavior is limited. First, as I discussed in §3.2, it only measures a specific behavioral output, not a more holistic view on character and behavior. Second, even if the measurements of the situationists are accurate, it does not *reject* the virtue ethical characterological moral psychology for it does not have to be

measured to be possible. As Flanagan explains, it only needs to be conceivable under some social arrangement, and even if we have not measured it now, it does not reject the possibility that there is a virtuous person.

However, these defenses of virtue ethical psychological realism are 'un-virtue ethical' in a way. As I explained, Doris, the situationists, and Miller believe that the behavior we measure tells us something about our moral psychology, and this picture differs from the moral psychological picture the virtue ethicists paint. This, in turn, has consequences for how we judge people's behavior and the moral behavior we prescribe to people. According to Doris, the virtue ethicists expect behavior and a character that is psychologically inadequate, and therefore expect too much from people.

We can question this claim, however, on the ground that the ideal, even if it is very difficult to achieve (as Aristotle also mentions), can be motivational and informative for action. Virtue ethics seems to have a different perspective on the role of ethics and its relation to psychology than Doris and Miller have. Where Doris and Miller emphasize the importance of the behavior we measure, the virtue ethicist seems to take into account our moral psychology, but he emphasizes the importance of the kind of (ethical) norms and values we hold and expect. In this sense, ethics is more on par with Flanagan's PMPR than Doris seems to imply; for the virtue ethicist it does not matter so much how people *do* act (although his moral psychology should account for it), but on how people *should* act. In a way, virtue ethics functions as a signpost to guide our development towards virtue. As with any journey, we get lost sometimes (even most of the times). Aristotle acknowledges this when he writes about the difficulty of becoming virtuous, but as we saw in Flanagan's explanation of PMPR; that something is difficult does not mean it violates PMPR.

In other words, virtue ethics, like any theory, sometimes (or most of the time) does not correspond with how things actually are. An economical model could, for example, exclude the possibility of banks failing and monetary systems such as the Euro collapsing. Still, this is what happens (and in the case of the Euro almost happened) in real life. Theory does not (always) correspond to practice. This, however, does not mean that what actually happens should guide a theory. We did not alter the guidelines for banks and the Euro to accommodate the negative and destructive behavior of bankers before the economic crises, but we altered the behavior to accommodate the theory. The same perspective is used for virtue ethics. We actually fail most of the time, but this failing does not render the use of virtue ethics pointless. On the contrary, it shows the need for a theory that explains how we *should* act. Also, that we do not act as we should is not evidence that the kind of

behavior we prescribe is impossible. At best, it shows that it is hard.

4.4 A Defense of Aristotelian Practical Wisdom

The theoretical part of the person-situation debate does not only concerns character and virtue, but also the possibility of practical reasoning and practical wisdom. As I explained in §2.4, Merritt, Doris, and Harman claim that the cognitive processes that influence our moral decision-making are substantially automatic and resistant to introspection. The consequence of this claim is that the Aristotelian account of practical wisdom does not meet the criteria of Flanagan's minimal psychological realism, for it would show that practical reason cannot be possible for human beings. In this section, I will question the plausibility of Merritt, Doris, and Harman's account by discussing some contemporary literature that illustrate different perspectives than the perspective of Merritt, Doris, and Harman. In this section I will question Merritt, Doris, and Harman's account on moral reasoning. I will not, however, give a conclusive argument for the rejection of Merritt, Doris, and Harman's view. Showing that we can question their view will suffice, for if their claims do not hold, Aristotelian practical wisdom will still meet the requirements of Flanagan's minimal psychological realism, which makes virtue ethics descriptive account more empirically adequate than the situationists claim.

It is important to remember that Merritt, Doris, and Harman do not claim that *all* our moral cognitive processes are automatic and resistant to introspection. Their claim is that the results from psychological experiments suggest that the cognitive processes that determine our behavior are *substantially* (but not exclusively) automatic and unreflective, and 'activated' by "morally arbitrary situational factors" (2010, 387). They conclude from these findings that virtue ethicists place too heavy a burden on the influence of an agent's reflection and evaluative commitments. Instead, they argue for more awareness of the influence that situational features can have on our behavior (they bypass our reflective capabilities) by understanding these situational features *before* we find ourselves in the situation. Thus, they argue for a form of 'preventive' moral reflection (see also §2.3).

The first question invoked by the account of Merritt, Doris, and Harman is whether the experimental observations really suggest that the cognitive processes that determine our behavior are substantially automatic and unreflective. According to Manuel Vargas, there is still an ongoing debate on how much of the mental life is automatic, and most of the stronger claims in this discussion are disputed on both methodological as well as conceptual grounds (Vargas 2011, 11). He refers to, among others, Eddy Nahmias (2007) who argues against the social psychological

research that claims that our autonomy—as action being guided by reasons, or the ability to recognize the relevant situational features—is severely limited. One of the points Nahmias makes is that the psychological experiments are set up in such a way that they do not measure the subject's introspective capabilities, but only his retrospective capabilities. Subjects were asked why they acted as they did *after* the experiment ended (Nahmias 2007, 179). My aim here is not to dive into this discussion on autonomy, for this would require a work of its own, but my point is rather that the claim of Merritt, Doris, and Harman, that the cognitive processes that determine our behavior are substantially automatic and unreflective, is still (heavily) debated. This debate questions the strength of their claim because Merritt, Doris, and Harman's argument against practical wisdom relies heavily on the automaticity of the cognitive processes that influence our behavior, which seems questionable at best.

The second question is that even if the experimental evidence shows that the moral cognitive processes that determine our behavior are substantially automatic and unreflective, this does not mean that our automatic and unreflective processes are non-rational or irrational. Merritt, Doris, and Harman agree that we can use the virtue ethical approach of practical wisdom to prescribe how we should act and react to the extent that the cognitive processes that determine our behavior are subject to reflective deliberation. We could make mental notes on how we should react next time we are in the same moral situation. However, Merritt, Doris, and Harman do not think this will have any substantive effect because of the "limited cognitive resources" (2010, 388) that are available in our moral cognition. Two things here are noteworthy: firstly, our moral cognition is not *wholly* automatic and unresponsive to introspection. Merritt, Doris, and Harman agree on this, but this needs to be emphasized because, secondly, Merritt, Doris, and Harman do not clarify whether the automatic cognitive processes are non-rational. This is an important point for practical wisdom because if our moral cognition is not wholly automatic, but even more importantly, if the automaticity of our cognitive processes does not also mean that they are non-rational, we can train our practical reason in the Aristotelian sense of developing it to recognize the morally relevant features of a situation.

What I have tried to illustrate in this section is that there is reason to doubt the critique of Merritt, Doris and Harman on practical reason. First, there is still an active debate in psychology about which cognitive processes are automatic and to what extent. Second, the fact that some of our moral cognitive processes are automatic or bypass our introspection does not imply that these processes cannot be developed to cause different, more morally desirable reactions. These two arguments

question the strength of Merritt, Doris, and Harman's claim against practical wisdom and show the possibility and plausibility of practical wisdom.

Conclusion

In the introduction of this chapter I explained that it seems that, based on Doris and Miller's psychological critique on virtue ethics, we should question whether it is at all possible to be or to become virtuous, since people generally do not seem to behave virtuously. I set out to answer the following sub-question in this chapter:

Should the virtue ethical moral psychology be rejected based on the person-situation debate?

To answer this question, I started, in §4.1, discussing an aspect of Doris' theory that I believe to be at the core of his theory: the Principle of Minimal Psychological Realism (PMPR). Doris claims that an ethical theory should be based on a moral psychology that resembles our actual human psychology. If an ethical theory, like virtue ethics, is not based on such a moral psychology, the behavior it prescribes will be impossible for humans to achieve, and the theory will therefore lose its practicality. In §4.2 I further examined PMPR by discussing Flanagan's own account. In this paragraph, it became clear that the scope of PMPR is more limited than Doris implies. According to Flanagan, the only restriction PMPR dictates is that an ethical theory should, at the very least, be possible or perceived possible for creatures like us. However, this is a *minimal requirement,* and it does not imply that the behavior prescribed by an ethical theory should "now be realized, or once have been realized, or been realized on average in actual persons" (Flanagan 1991, 201).

The consequence of the conclusion from §4.2 is that virtue ethics is only based on an inadequate moral psychology if it has been proven that it is humanly impossible to have such a moral psychology. I discussed this question in §4.3. From §3.1 it already became clear that the situationists' experimental results cannot conclusively prove that an Aristotelian moral psychology is humanly impossible. More importantly, however, I argued that defending virtue ethics along the lines of PMPR is 'un-ethical' in a way, because if we defend ethics this way, we follow the paradigm of both Doris and Miller that measuring behavior is (most) important for the kind of ethical behavior we prescribe. A more ethical view is that ethics is less concerned with how people *do* act, and more concerned with how people *should* act. This is not to say that virtue ethics therefore can and does violate PMPR. In fact, it follows Flanagan's definition in that it might not be measured yet, but it is

considered humanly possible. More importantly, though, is that virtue ethics, like any theory, sometimes (or most of the time) does not correspond to how things actually are. We actually fail most of the time, but this failing does not render the use of virtue ethics pointless. On the contrary, it shows the need for a theory that explains how we *should* act. Also, the fact that we do not act as we should is no evidence for the claim that the kind of behavior we prescribe is impossible. At best, it shows that it is hard.

In the final section of this chapter, §4.4, I tried to illustrate that there is reason to doubt the critique of Merritt, Doris, and Harman on practical reason. First, there is still an active debate in psychology on which cognitive processes are automatic and to what extent. Second, the fact that some of our moral cognitive processes are automatic or bypass our introspection does not imply that these processes cannot be developed to cause different, more morally desirable reactions. These two arguments question the strength of Merritt, Doris, and Harman's claim against practical wisdom and show the possibility and plausibility of practical wisdom.

In short, the answer to the sub-question is as follows. The person-situation debate shows that the virtue ethical characterological moral psychology might over-emphasize the robustness of our character traits, and under-emphasize the influence of external factors that influence our behavior. However, this is not to say that Doris and the situationists are right in claiming that virtue ethics is based on an inadequate moral psychology and therefore expects too much from people. As I showed in this chapter, virtue ethics does not violate PMPR and has a perspective on the role of ethics that differs from the empirical perspective of both Doris and Miller. This perspective, however, has its own merits that are specifically ethical. This, in turn, gives virtue ethics its strength as a theory and ideal that can and should inform us of the kind of values we should hold, and the ideals that should guide our actions.

Conclusion

In the introduction, I formulated the following research question that I wanted to answer:

How can Aristotelian virtue ethicists convincingly reply to the criticism of the situationists?

My aim was to give an overview of the *types* of arguments that are used in the philosophical person-situation debate, and discuss the consequences this debate has for virtue ethics. As my research question shows, I wanted to explain the debate from a virtue ethical perspective, and defend (if possible) virtue ethics against situationism. The consequence of this approach was that I did not evaluate all three positions in the person-situation debate, but only discussed the positions (especially the reconciliatory position) to the extent to which they questioned virtue ethics.

To answer my research question I divided it into four sub-questions. In what follows I will first discuss my answers to these sub-questions before I answer my research question. My sub-questions were:

- What is the Aristotelian/virtue ethical view on virtue ethics and character?
- What does situationism entail, and what is the situationists' critique on virtue ethics?
- What strategies are used to reply to situationism?
- Should the virtue ethical moral psychology be rejected based on the person-situation debate?

In chapter 1, I explained the Aristotelian/virtue ethical view on virtue ethics and character in order to answer the first sub-question ('what is the Aristotelian/virtue ethical view on virtue ethics and character?'). My answer was that according to Aristotle, human beings have character traits that are dispositions to react to and on the passions we feel. We can react to our passions in a bad, good, or excellent way, and thus have bad, good, or excellent character traits. The excellent character traits are what Aristotle calls moral virtue; these are the right dispositions in order to act accordingly: a mean between defect and excess. Having these dispositions, however, is not enough. We must also have practical wisdom (an intellectual virtue) in order to

recognize how to act in a specific situation and to attain our goal of happiness. The combination of moral virtue and practical wisdom is what Aristotle calls 'virtue in the strict sense'. A virtuous person, according to Aristotle, knows why and when to act, and towards whom.

I discussed the answer to the second sub-question ('what does situationism entail, and what is the situationists' critique on virtue ethics?') in chapter 2. My answer was that the situationists argue against the virtue ethical view on character based on the results of different empirical psychological experiments. Doris and the situationists argue for what they call an empirically adequate moral psychology where (morally neutral) external situational factors are the main influence on our behavior. Doris' main claim is that virtue ethics is based on a flawed moral psychology, which has consequences for the feasibility of the kind of behavior virtue ethicists prescribe to and expect of people. Instead of this flawed characterological psychology, Doris offers an alternative: a situationist moral psychology. According to Doris, people are mostly influenced by (morally irrelevant) external factors and they do not possess 'global' character traits but local ones. We should, according to Doris, use this moral psychology (which is more adequate than the virtue ethical one) to help act and judge better in specific situations. Furthermore, Merritt, Doris, and Harman argue against the concept of practical wisdom, claiming that the cognitive processes that influence our behavior are substantially automatic and unreflective.

In the third chapter I answered the third sub-question ('what strategies are used to reply to situationism?') by discussing two lines of virtue ethical replies against situationism: a methodological and conceptual reply. From these replies the image emerged that the situationists' experiments are not equipped to measure the virtue ethical conception of character. Situationists' narrow understanding of character forms an expectancy that character traits show themselves in a standard kind of reaction, but the virtue ethical concept of character is much more inclusive and holistic, consisting of a persons beliefs, desires, emotions, etc.

In the third chapter I also discussed the third position in the person-situation debate: the reconciliatory position. The reconciliatory reply can vary, but I illustrated it with Miller's Mixed Trait theory. According to Miller, most people do not possess either the virtue ethical virtues or vices. Instead, people have what he calls Mixed Traits: character traits that consist of morally positive and negative features. Miller's theory is a reconciliatory theory because, like the situationists, he emphasizes the importance of psychological research and data, but, like the virtue ethicists, he does not deny or the existence of character or downgrade its influence.

In the fourth chapter I answered my fourth sub-question ('should the virtue ethical moral psychology be rejected based on the person-situation debate?') by

discussing Flanagan's Principle of Minimal Psychological Realism (PMPR) and discussing how Doris interprets it. Doris claims that an ethical theory should be based on a moral psychology that resembles our actual human psychology. If an ethical theory, like virtue ethics, is not based on such a moral psychology the behavior it prescribes will be impossible for humans to achieve, and the theory will therefore lose its practicality. I further examined PMPR by discussing Flanagan's explanation of it and concluded that PMPR is a minimal requirement that does not imply that the characterological theory of an ethical theory should be realized now or on average in actual persons. This conclusion has consequences for Doris' claim: virtue ethics only violates PMPR if it is (conceived as) humanly impossible. The situationists or Miller, however, do not prove this. Furthermore, ethics is more concerned with how people *should* act than how they do *act*; it acts as a signpost to guide people's behavior. I therefore concluded that the virtue ethical characterological moral psychology might over-emphasize the robustness of our character traits, and under-emphasize the influence of external factors that influence our behavior. However, this is not to say that Doris and the situationists are right in claiming that virtue ethics is based on an inadequate moral psychology and therefore expects too much from people.

I am now in a position to answer my research question, so let me repeat it once more:

How can Aristotelian virtue ethicists convincingly reply to the criticism of the situationists?

The short answer is that the virtue ethicists can give several convincing replies to the criticism of the situationists. With regard to the situationists' critique on the virtue ethical concept of character, the virtue ethicists can reply on both methodological and conceptual grounds to the criticism of the situationists. Especially the methodological reply seems to be viable and fundamental. Sabini and Silver, for example show that the consistency in behavior is not measured by the psychological experiments the situationists bring forth, and Fleming explains that the situationists miss some vital information with regard to the our decision-making. From a conceptual perspective, Kamtekar argues that the virtue ethical idea of character is much more inclusive and broad than the situationists' understanding of it; it includes beliefs, desires, emotion, and the way an agent perceives of the world and a situation. This misunderstanding has methodological consequences; the situationists' experiments are not equipped to measure this complex process of decision-making. Instead, the situationists only measure a (almost behavioristic) standard reaction to

different impulses that do not take into account all the other processes that are at work.

More specifically, the virtue ethicists can argue against Doris' idea of psychological realism. According to Doris, an ethical theory should be based on a moral psychology that resembles our actual human psychology. If an ethical theory is not based on such a moral psychology a gap appears to what we as humans actually can do, and what we expect people to do. In other words, an ethical theory becomes too demanding. Doris bases this central claim on Flanagan's Principle of Minimal Psychological Realism (PMPR). However, virtue ethics does not violate PMPR, because the scope of PMPR is very limited. As Flanagan explains, PMPR implies that an ethical should be based on a moral psychology that is possible for human beings, but this does not imply that the kind of moral character an ethical theory prescribes is already realized or realized on average in actual persons. It needs to be conceivable under a social construct.

Virtue ethics does not violate PMPR because situationism has not proven that the moral psychology it (virtue ethics) prescribes is impossible for human beings. Furthermore, virtue ethics is less concerned with the kind of behavior people *actually* show, and more concerned with the kind of behavior people *should* show. It therefore offers an ideal that informs our conduct and functions as a signpost to show us the way

With regard to the situationists' critique on practical wisdom, the virtue ethicists can reply that there is still an active debate in psychology about which cognitive processes are automatic and to what extent. Furthermore, the fact that some of our moral cognitive processes are automatic or bypass our introspection does not imply that these processes cannot be developed to cause different, more morally desirable reactions. I discussed these two replies to show that Merritt, Doris, and Harman's critique on practical wisdom is not conclusive, and that there is still a possibility and plausibility for practical wisdom.

Still, the virtue ethicists do not come out of the debate unharmed. The situationists' position—as well as Miller's reconciliatory position—shows that the virtue ethical conception of character and how it influences our behavior is at least overrated. The results from psychology might not conclusively prove that the virtue ethical moral psychology is humanly impossible, it does imply that the virtue ethicists may have underestimated the influence of (morally irrelevant) external factors on our behavior. I believe that the way forward will consists of collaboration between psychologists and virtue ethicists along the lines of Christian Miller's project. If psychologists and philosophers perform long-term experiments and discuss different conceptual problems together, they might come up with a moral

psychology that is more adequate than either the virtue ethical moral psychology or the situationist moral psychology.

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