PHRONESIS AFTER SITUATIONISM

by

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A Dissertation

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Abstract

Situationism, as put forward by John Doris' Lack of Character (2002) and several short articles by Gilbert Harman (2003, 2000, 1999), is the philosophical position that is skeptical of the existence of robust character traits of the kind that Aristotle described. Situationism posits that human beings lack robust character traits and are too easily made overconfident in their own behavioral abilities. Reams of social psychological data suggest that such 'thick' character traits do not exist. Doris and Harman suggest that subtle and potentially irrelevant situational cues may easily influence behavior. Moreover, situational pressures may cause people to deviate from expected and self-reported predictions of behavior. I claim that situationists like Doris and Harman move too quickly in drawing conclusions about experimental data and generalizing them to the rest of the population. Concerns exist regarding the methodology of such experiments, and how situationism understands the term 'character trait.' Because of these considerations, the challenge fails and AVE may retain talk of character traits in moral psychology. Further, I argue that AVE must embrace the psychological fragility of character traits, but not the psychological fragmentation of traits posited by situationists. This prompts theoretical development of the concept of phronesis (Aristotelian 'practical wisdom') as encompassing not only right reason applied to action, but a kind of sensitivity or awareness of social cues that may influence our behavior. Finally, I end the dissertation with a sketch of the moral imagination and its role in deliberation and this revised understanding of Aristotelian phronesis.
# Contents

Abstract.................................................................................................................................................. ii

Contents................................................................................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgments.................................................................................................................................... v

## Chapter One

1.Ia Preface.............................................................................................................................................. 1

1.Ib Why Aristotle?.................................................................................................................................. 3

1.I Teleology, Excellence, and Virtue....................................................................................................... 10

1.II Metaphysics, Ontology, and Psychology of the Virtues.................................................................. 15

1.III Virtue, Desire, and Voluntary Action.............................................................................................. 18

1.IV Character and Habit....................................................................................................................... 22

1.V Practical Reason (Phronesis) and Action.......................................................................................... 25

1.VI The Explanatory and Predictive Power of Character.................................................................... 28

## Chapter Two

2.I Situationism's Dispute with Aristotelian Characterology................................................................. 32

2.II The Specific Challenges to Character: Doris' Situationism............................................................. 42

2.III The Specific Challenges to Character: Harman's View................................................................. 47

## Chapter Three

3.1a The Rara Avis Reply to Situationism............................................................................................... 56

3.I Critique of Harman............................................................................................................................ 58

3.II Lack of Character, Critiqued............................................................................................................. 77

3.III Lessons from the Situationist Challenge....................................................................................... 90

3.IV The Road Ahead................................................................................................................................ 92

## Chapter Four

4.I An Alternative Response to Situationism: Maria Merritt's HVE..................................................... 94

4.II Objections and Analysis.................................................................................................................... 100
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.III</td>
<td>A Phronesis of Fragility: Preliminary Remarks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.IVa</td>
<td>A Refinement of Phronesis as Sensitivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.IVb</td>
<td>Objections to Sensitivity and Perception?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.V</td>
<td>Phronesis and Social Embeddedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.VI</td>
<td>Contemplation and Self-Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.VII</td>
<td>A Final Hurdle: Answering the Postscriptum to Lack of Character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter Five</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.I</td>
<td>The Aspects of Moral Imagination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.II</td>
<td>MI as Empathetic Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.III</td>
<td>MI as 'Acrobat'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.IV</td>
<td>MI as Counterfactual Prediction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.V</td>
<td>MI as Retrospective Insight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.VI</td>
<td>MI as Acknowledgment of Complexity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.VII</td>
<td>Relationships and Interdependencies of the Aspects of MI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.VIII</td>
<td>Concluding Remarks About the Aspects of MI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.IX</td>
<td>Final Conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bibliography</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bibliography

iv
Acknowledgments

To Cynthia:

The essence of all beautiful art,
of all great art, is gratitude.

- Nietzsche

To Kathi, Ed, Mary, and Mildred:

γηράσκω δ᾽ αἰεὶ πολλὰ διδασκόμενος.
I grow old, always learning many things.

- Solon

To Jason, Rachel, and Dave:

Education is not the filling of a pail,
But the lighting of a fire.

- W.B. Yeats

To Pal:

Meeowrgh.
Chapter One

Surely what a man does when he is taken off his guard is the best evidence for what sort of man he is...

If there are rats in a cellar you are most likely to see them if you go in very suddenly. But the suddenness does not create the rats: it only prevents them from hiding.

- C.S. Lewis

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I lay out three central motivations for adopting the Aristotelian way of doing ethics. Having done this, I then provide a contextual summary of Aristotle which focuses heavily on two concepts, prohairesis and phronesis. I discuss a 'shallow' reading of each, and then dismiss such a reading in favor of a 'deeper' interpretation which is not only more philosophically accurate, but also will better allow me to confront the 'situationist challenge' to Aristotelian virtue ethics (hereafter, AVE), which is delineated in the next chapter.

Ia – Preface

Ethical disagreements typically begin with two (or more) people whose minds are
already made up as to what they feel is 'right' or 'good', and why that is. Trying to
dislodge one's cherished belief system in favor of a foreign one is hard to do. Many
people, though not all, are ethical xenophobes.

The purported 'roots' of morality are up for vigorous debate. Reasonable and
defensible arguments are put forward by numerous thinkers, from the theological to the
evolutionary. But, what I want to highlight in this brief preface is my contention that a
large component of choosing an ethical theory is essentially preference. One or another
theory resonates with us because, I think, we already have decided on certain normative
views, even if we lack the sophistication to express them systemically.¹ Ethical theories
are ways to formalize and justify those same views by reference to something outside of
ourselves, such as God, utility, duty, flourishing, peace of mind, etc. Ceteris paribus, we
do not examine theories and then choose one which is most rational or most truthful.
Instead, I believe that we find (or create) theories that represent our own extant beliefs
and values, however nebulously we may understand them at the time.² As Nietzsche
says in Beyond Good and Evil, “the greater part of the conscious thinking of a
philosopher is secretly influenced by his instincts, and forced into definite channels”;
philosophies are the “confessions” of their authors.³ If this is plausible, then my

¹ This is not to say that our ethical theories are like ice cream flavors, chosen on a whim. Rather (as Jason
D'Cruz, in a personal communication to the author puts it) “we make intuitive, holistic judgments about
the aptness of a theory rather than having a clearly articulated objective standard against which we
judge its aptness.”
² Of course, this is all presented conversationally and by way of introduction. I cannot defend such a
metaethical and psychological position here, and I will not try to. Nevertheless, there is much profitable
work to be done in this area in the future, and the study of ethical discourse can only be improved by the
contributions that such work would make.
³ Beyond Good and Evil, trans. Zimmern, Ch. 1
confession is one of an Aristotelian because such a view resonates with, and articulates, my own feelings about how to live well.

But, just because we find a theory that reflects our biases or prejudices, we are not damned to unreflectively accept such a theory. There are better and worse justifications out there, and we must be able to defend an ethical theory on sound footing if it is to remain academically and personally viable. Aristotelian virtue ethics is the theory which fits my own approach to moral philosophy, and as such, I have examined many attempts to defend it. I will discuss a few in the next section in an attempt to justify why I believe that Aristotelianism is worth pursuing overall, and especially why the work in this dissertation is necessary to this ethical tradition.

And, as a final note: the focus of this work takes place within a very specific tradition in ethics, and in many senses, this dissertation is written by an Aristotelian for other Aristotelians who are concerned with a common problem. This doesn't exclude others who are interested in Aristotle for whatever reasons, but it does mean that I am assuming a certain familiarity and ethical orientation throughout this work.

Ib. Why Aristotle?

Why are Aristotle's ideas about ethics so important and so attractive? One answer is that they occupy a prominent place in the history of Western thought. But, still, why ought one devote time to reading the *Nicomachean* or *Eudemian Ethics*, let alone seriously consider their contents as a prescription for living a certain kind of life?
In this section, I present three weighty considerations as to why one might want to be an Aristotelian about ethics, especially in the face of many consequentialist or deontological theories which are, *prima facie*, somewhat attractive.

**Flexibility.** Consequentialisms and deontologies, as theories, each emphasize a different aspect of how and why we (should) act. They are concerned with outcomes and duties, respectively. And, the reason that we have anxiety-inducing thought experiments when considering such theories is that no one prescription will cure our ethical ills. We cannot live a life solely fixated on outcomes, nor on duties. Indeed, we must become competent judges of what consideration is *the* consideration for a certain situation. And, this kind of broader ethical theory must also be flexible to allow for such deliberation among key ethical principles. In my view, the theory which provides such flexibility is AVE.

Sometimes a better consequence must take a backseat to a deeply-valued ethical principle, and sometimes a firm and principled rule needs to be broken for a better overall outcome. AVE understands and accepts this, and gives priority to a (wise) person’s judgment and his understanding of when and how to apply that judgment. In that light, AVE should be seen as a balm to the potentially painful orthodoxy of Kantianism and utilitarianism.4 Each of these stricter theories presents us with difficult, unintuitive cases where it seems we must either forsake our given theory, or else do something unsavory. And, each theory can face difficulties when it comes to a clashing of intuitions.

4 Thanks to Jason D’Cruz for suggesting this apt turn of phrase.
For instance: should I lie to the Gestapo officer at my front door regarding the location of the hidden refugees in the basement? Kant, holding that truth-telling is a strict duty, would say that I should not lie. But, this clashes with our shared sense of right and wrong. Hence, I must either give up my Kantianism or else do something I should deeply regret. A consequentialist may encounter a similar concern (perhaps intuition dictates that I lie to the officer, even if it leads to less-than-optimal results). But, a stronger concern with consequentialism is that such a theory has a hard time explaining why we feel it actually is wrong to tell a lie, even if it were to produce the best consequences.

AVE does not say that either action (lying or truth-telling) is the right answer simpliciter. Instead, we must consider many aspects of our situation in order to make a judgment about which course of action is required. Further, AVE would remind us that there is a right way to either lie or tell the truth, neither divulging nor withholding too much. And, finally, we must have the right emotional response when we make our choice – for instance, I ought to feel hesitant about telling a lie, and I ought to feel some regret about doing so, even if the lie is morally justified, all things considered. These considerations of circumstance and context are what I see as making AVE more flexible than its theoretical rivals. It allows us to find solutions which correspond to our intuitions, but which do not force us to surrender our theory in the process. As Steven Fesmire (2003: 57) remarks, “seeing [one's] situations solely through the lens of one

5 Perhaps the officer skips a door-to-door search of my town, and simply rolls grenades into everyone's basements which kill many more people than would have been killed had I told the truth.
6 We might think of a paternalistic kind of lie for this scenario, like Plato's “Noble Lie”
factor—as a matter of duty not virtue, of rights not consequences, and so on—relegates other factors that require coordination [...] Tunneled perception inhibits deliberation at least as much as it helpfully focuses it. To invoke [William] James, much ethical theorizing is 'a monstrous abridgement of life.'

Virtue ethics allows, I argue, for the most unabridged approach to life.

**Holism.** AVE emphasizes *being* a certain kind of person rather than merely *doing* certain kinds of things. What kind of person someone is figures into how that person interprets his duties, and how he reasonably conceives of the outcomes of his actions. Hence, a single focus on either duty or consequences seems at best incomplete, and at worst parochial. Ignoring an agent's personality and character presents us with only part of what is important in ethics, as I have tried to point out in the preceding section about AVE's flexibility when compared to other moral theories. Therefore, due to their incorrectly isolating one important principle of action, consequentialisms and deontologies overlook other important principles. One of these is the morally central concept of an agent's character, understood as the agent's typical emotions and dispositions when it comes to ethical deliberation and action. This is why AVE, as I see it, presents a theory which is ethically holistic, while its competitors present theories that are ethically meromorphic.

AVE places the heaviest evaluative importance upon the interior states of the agent, while deontologies and consequentialisms evaluate primarily outward

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7 Fesmire says that these factors are relegated to the bottom of the list when it comes to importance; for instance, we may ignore morally important emotional aspects of a situation when only focusing on a principle of truth.
performances of action. Thus, while AVE advocates a synchronization between the
agent's inner and outer life, other theories place less stress on this harmony.  

Flourishing. Aristotle, as I will discuss in the next section, assumes a teleological
or function-driven view of the universe. Everything has its own peculiar function, or
'goal', towards which it strives. As it turns out, the function of human beings on this
account is a life of rational activity which aims at eudaimonia, usually now translated as
'flourishing'. For thousands of years, philosophers and scientists were guided by
teleological worldviews similar to Aristotle's. But, in the last two hundred years (and in
particular, the last few decades), there has been a strong and conscious movement to
remove such talk from our philosophical and scientific understandings of the cosmos.
Nowadays, teleology seems to be the exception rather than the rule it once was. For
instance, Korsgaard (1986: 259) remarks that “[s]ome critics see [such arguments] as [...
illicit...]. [T]hey cannot see why our good should be thought to lie in the good
performance of our function, or indeed why we should be thought to have a function at
all.” It is not my place here to argue for or against teleology in particular, but only to
suggest that one can find an attraction to Aristotle's ethics without adopting, wholesale,
his teleological framework. There is still much to be valued in the points about human

8 This is not to suggest that Kant, e.g., or Mill argue that interior states are unimportant. Indeed, even
Kant argues that the best state is when one does his or her duty willingly and with gladness. However,
the concepts of duty and maximized utility – both in the form of outward performances – seem to steal
the spotlight from the agent's inner motivations.
9 There are attempts (viz. Hursthouse (1999) and Foot (2001)) to revive a kind of teleological
interpretation which blends well with AVE. The idea – interesting, but not uncontroversial – is that we
can model our moral evaluations to a degree on biological evaluations of living things. That is, we can
identify 'good' and 'defective' examples of animals based on their natural features and lifestyles. So, by
outlining certain empirical facts about human beings, we may be able to provide similar moral
evaluations in terms of good and defective moral agents. While this may be profitable to my enterprise,
I do not treat this approach at length as a motivation for AVE.

7
flourishing and how virtuous traits are conducive to this end.

Remember that Aristotle links up human flourishing with the end, or aims, of our actions. We don't do what we do with the goal of misery or unhappiness; nobody undertakes life projects with the sincere hope that they lead to failure and depression! And, Aristotle suggests that being a good (read: virtuous) person is necessary to have a shot at living a flourishing life. *Eudaimonia* does not just encompass good actions, of course, or mere momentary happiness. Instead, it is a very rich understanding of a 'good life' wherein one can form lasting and fruitful relationships, undertake personal projects and plans, achieve successes in diverse spheres of activity, and explore all of the potential creative avenues that are available to human beings.

Consequentialisms and Kantian deontologies seem to miss the mark here. Instead of focusing on human flourishing as the goal, they actually seem to imply that one must *forsake* any shot at flourishing in order to uphold duty's mandates, or commit oneself to always seeking the best consequences.¹⁰ Michael Stocker (1997: 68) remarks that

> [ethical theories like consequentialism and deontology] fail by making it impossible for a person to achieve the good in an integrated way [...] they fail, not only by putting us in a position that is psychologically uncomfortable, difficult, or even untenable, but also by making us and our lives essentially fragmented and incoherent.

What Stocker is pointing at here is the fundamental disconnect between those other ethical theories and what we really think is valuable, i.e. an integrated and flourishing

¹⁰ One is reminded here of Peter Singer's argument to the tune that we ought to give almost every spare penny to charitable organizations, leaving only a subsistence-level income for us and our families.
life. [Indeed, in AVE, virtues just are the traits which tend to promote a happy and flourishing life in a human being.] He sums up his criticism of those theories, which serves as an encomium to AVE, by stating (1997: 71-72) that “[w]hat is lacking in these theories is[... the person... Such theories] prevent each of us from loving, caring for, and valuing ourself – as opposed to loving, caring for, and valuing our general values, or ourself-qua-producer-or-possessor-of-general-values.” In order to flourish, we must devote at least some ethical attention to ways in which we should value and appreciate ourselves and others, and ways to cultivate meaningful and valuable relationships with others. AVE endorses such things as inherently valuable, and partly constitutive of human flourishing, while deontology and consequentialism miss such important facets of a good human life.

I have presented, but not conclusively defended, a threefold motivation for adopting AVE. And, admittedly, it is not my task here to offer such a defense or vindication of AVE. What is important, though, is to set up some plausible reasons for being an Aristotelian when it comes to ethics, since this is the theory that I will attempt to defend and refine in this dissertation. Having established it as a contender (if not the contender) among prevalent ethical theories, I can now concentrate on that agenda without fearing that my view is unable to even get off the ground.

The next step is to explore the connections between certain of Aristotle's various metaphysical concepts insofar as they can shed light on what Aristotle understands by his usage of terms like 'virtue', 'habit', 'character', etc. Thus, the remainder of this
chapter will be an exegetical analysis of these selected Aristotelian virtue-theoretic concepts, with most of the space being devoted to prohairesis and phronesis. Why these? Well, the latter is intimately involved with the former, and a virtuous person cannot be such if they lack either one of these abilities. This is important because the virtuous person is identified with his possession and exercising of phronesis as he makes consistently good choices, in the right way, and for the right reasons.

Insofar as John Doris (2005: 659, citing Kamtekar (2004)) reports, “the empirical record does problematize familiar conceptions of practical rationality,” it is incumbent upon the defender of Aristotelian virtue to examine this charge and see if practical rationality can be vindicated. I argue that it can, since the situationist challenge ultimately fails (cf. Chapter Three) but gives us new insights into how phronesis works and the things with which it must concern itself (cf. Chapter Four and Chapter Five).

I. Teleology, Excellence, and Virtue

Aristotle's teleological worldview derives from “his empirical study of nature... [and] also from a metaphysical premise concerning the relation between potentiality and actuality” (Mirus, 2004: 724). Specifically, his teleology relies on the concept of to ou heneka, translated by Mirus (Ibid.) as “that for the sake of which.” This is to be understood as the final and best state of a substance, brought about by action: it is “that

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11 Mirus makes a point to note that an examination of Aristotelian metaphysics reveals that “the roots of [his] teleology are not bound up with his biology, as several contemporary writers have suggested” (699). However, for this project, the specific origin of Aristotelian teleology does not concern me; I am less concerned if his teleology started because of biology than I am with the fact that it applies to biology.
for the sake of which” the substance exists in the first place, and the state towards which it naturally moves (Ibid: 699). As Mirus explains, “[a]lthough form is the immediate end of [the process of] coming to be, a composite substance exists [...] for the sake of its activity” (Ibid.). Aristotle refers to to ou heneka as an 'end', or telos, when it is the result of some kind of motion or activity (Ibid.: 699, 724). Teleology assumes that every substance has some kind of goal, function, or end which is appropriate to it. And, Aristotle eventually extends this to human beings qua substances. Human beings have their unique telos too, which I examine later.

Let us examine a simple case to help understand Aristotle's teleology as it applies to particular kinds of things. A good example is that of 'Aristotle's knife' from Philosophy 101. Artifacts, such as knives, have a goal or purpose – some purpose for the sake of which they were made. We see evidence of this when we stop to consider complicated artifacts like computers and vehicles, but also when we reflect on simpler ones like basic tools and utilitarian implements. The knife is an example of this latter category of artifacts, and its characteristic, activity-laced function (its telos) is to cut. Thus, cutting is what the knife was made to do. Applying Mirus' analysis, we see that cutting is the to ou heneka of the object (the activity for the sake of which the knife exists). One can even see teleology at work in more biological, Aristotelian examples such as eyes and ears (whose functions are seeing and hearing, respectively).

These examples are straightforward enough, but a teleological framework of nature becomes more complicated once we start to consider entire biological organisms
themselves and not just their parts and artifacts. Indeed, one may try to come up with general sorts of functions for classes of living things, but even this approach can be unclear. And, the difficulty does not decrease when the subject of human teleology is raised. It isn't immediately clear what our purpose would be, even if we concede that we have some kind of function or purpose ex hypothesi. The issue before us is discerning the function of a human being. So, according to Aristotle, what is our to ou heneka?

Aristotle considers simply "living" as the function of a man, but dismisses this because it is not unique enough; this, understood as "nutrition and growth" is a function that we share with plants and other animals. It does not constitute our human essence, that property which identifies us as Homo sapiens. Therefore, simply 'surviving' cannot be the unique function of a human being. Next, Aristotle dismisses a life of "sense perception" since it is shared with the majority of animals. Dogs, koalas, and narwhals are able to process and react to sensory stimuli from their environments, too, and this demonstrates that sense perception is not essential to human beings either. The only option left, at least for Aristotle, is a "life of action of the [part of the soul] that has reason" (1097b30 - 1098a5). This aspect of the soul, he believes, is something that plants and animals do not possess.\footnote{This isn't to say that animals are devoid of any kind of reason, but, as Irwin (in Aristotle (1999): 184) notes, other animals are restricted to “goal-directed movements” rather than action subordinate to practical reason as humans are capable of.} This is what he identifies as indicative of our unique function, our human telos. This kind of mental and physical activity is “the type of activity that is essential to human beings” (following Irwin in Aristotle (1999): 184).

Further, Irwin (Ibid.) points out that the part of the soul which has reason is actually
dichotomous, containing both non-rational desire as well as the faculty of practical rationality (phronesis) which can mold one's desires to agree with what is rational (reasonable) to do in a situation. [I will discuss this in more detail below.]

Aristotle identifies the human telos as mental activity, yet suggests that simply living a rationally active life (i.e. just thinking human thoughts) is not sufficient. Indeed, this does not by itself mean that we have successfully exercised our function or acted well. The key phrase in Aristotle's account is 'activity', which means mental as well as physical movements. So, we need to live an active life in some kind of relation to the thoughts we have.

This examination may help make things clearer: to understand, truly, what the complete telos of a thing is, we must look to excellent examples of those things. Looking at a good X makes it that much clearer what the function of X actually is: “the function of a [kind of thing]... is the same in kind as the function of an excellent individual of the kind” (1098a8-10). So, looking to a knife which cuts exceptionally well lets us understand (i) what the function is, and (ii) what level of success is possible with a fine example of that object. Assessing fine examples helps us 'set the bar', if you will.

The function of a superior kind of X is to perform its X-function excellently, but it is still the same type of function as a mediocre or even a poor example of an X. To use a simplified example, the putative function of any plant is to grow and reproduce. All plants have such a function, but excellent plants grow and reproduce excellently. That is, they thrive and produce many offspring.
This discussion of function is important for Aristotle, because he has established prior to this (in 1097b15-20) that happiness is that good which “makes a [human] life choiceworthy and lacking nothing” - it is “complete and self-sufficient” and “the end of the things achievable in action.” So, by arguing that we desire and aim at happiness by our actions, Aristotle is then able to show how happiness is associated with, and representative of, the superior state of human functioning. We are most likely to be happy, *ceteris paribus*, when we partake in excellent and successful human action.\(^\text{13}\) Insofar as he thinks that action is impossible without some kind of reason or rationality, we see the link between mind and body in the human *telos*.

Looking once again to 'excellent' versions of things, Aristotle identifies a link between having *phronesis* and excellently fulfilling the human function: sound practical reason results in an excellent life of rational activity. This increases our chances at being happy. For, if we are to be truly happy (flourishing, *eudaimon*) then it is necessary, but not sufficient, that we be excellent people.\(^\text{14}\)

Having established this connection, Aristotle must now discuss and elaborate upon what it means to be a 'good' or 'excellent' person. He uses the term 'virtue' to refer to that property which allows a thing to achieve its goal well - for instance, if the goal of a knife is to cut, the goal of a good knife is to cut well... so much we have already seen. What then is the virtue (or virtues) of a knife? I think they would be something like

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\(^\text{13}\) This is corroborated in the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*), 1219a34-5, where Aristotle remarks that “happiness is activity of a good soul.”

\(^\text{14}\) This point appears in *EE* 1219b1-7, wherein Aristotle says that “nothing incomplete is happy” in paraphrasing Solon.
'sharpness' primarily, though it may have other virtues like 'durability' and 'balance.' These are all the qualities which allow a knife to cut well (in Greek, these are the aretai of the knife, from arete, 'excellence'). Moreover, the best kinds of knives will have these excellences, or virtues. Since these knives are ex hypothesi the best cutters, they must have the traits which enable such excellent activity.

We can discern the following from examining the first few books of the Ethics: since the function of human beings is to live in accordance with reason, and the function of a good human being is to live this kind of life well, the virtues for human beings would be those properties which are conducive to the best kind of life, the life which is flourishing and eudaimon. The virtues are necessary for human happiness since our happiness is attendant upon fulfilling our function well. But, they are by no means sufficient to guarantee that happiness by themselves. Simply exercising the virtues will not generate a good life, but those who exercise the virtues stand the best chance of attaining such a life. With his typical pragmatism, Aristotle remarks that we need other things in life (resources like money, good friends, a bit of beauty, etc.) in order to truly live blessedly as a eudaimon.

II. Metaphysics, Ontology, & Psychology of the Virtues

We have examined what the virtues would be for a knife (e.g.), and they turn out

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15 'Excellence' is one of the closest approximations for the Greek term that can be understood by a contemporary audience. Of course, the original context and definition of the term is much more inclusive than just an excellence.
16 Vide supra, note 3; also, NE 1100a10-1101b7 for the requirements on post mortem happiness
to be certain properties or traits of that object which aid it in the excellent exercising of its function. And, we understand that a virtue for human beings is some kind of property that helps them achieve happiness and live a flourishing life. However, human beings are not artifacts like knives, nor are we as simple as plants and other animals. Aristotle believes that he can offer a more detailed account by examining the human soul, wherein the virtues must reside. A thorough understanding of Aristotelian moral psychology is necessary to mount a successful response to the situationists, so this section focuses on just that topic: what kind of things are virtues, and how are they related to the person?

Aristotle claims that there are three "conditions" arising in a human soul - feelings, capacities, and states of character. Thus, a virtue must have one of these three as its genus (1105b20-21). Feelings are things like emotions or desires, capacities are the abilities to have feelings, and states are how we are "in relation to" our feelings. That is, states represent the degree of feeling that a person has and how well-off the person is when they stand in that relationship to their emotions.\footnote{The term used for "state" here is hexis, which is the word also translated as "character trait". This is indicative of Aristotle's belief that a state of character just is a certain state of the soul. The literal interpretation is that the soul has a kind of 'holding' or 'possession' (hexis) which constitutes the trait.}

A virtue is not a feeling. We are not deemed excellent or deficient, Aristotle argues, by our feelings alone. You are not a bad person for becoming angry – only in becoming angry in the wrong way or at the wrong time, for instance. Thus, Aristotle makes an argument from how (and what) we praise and blame to demonstrate that virtues are not simply emotions that we experience.
Similarly, virtue cannot be a mere capacity, since Aristotle argues that we have these by nature, but are not good or bad – virtuous or vicious – by nature. I have the capacity to eat a lot, or to be fair and amiable, but these arise almost by chance.\footnote{Of course, modern interpretation of Aristotle would require a fair amount of legwork to show how genetics plays a part in determining our capacities. But, for the purposes of this discussion here, I take it that the phrase “by chance” works well enough and conveys the right sort of meaning.} They demarcate what my possibilities are in a given situation, or over the course of my life, but they themselves are not grounds for moral approbation or censure. And, while they may influence my action to some degree, they are not action-guiding in the way that virtues and vices seem to be: being able to be a kind person does not produce any regularity of kind behavior on my part all by itself. Hence, Aristotle concludes that a virtue is not a simple capacity within oneself for some particular kind of action.

By elimination, then, virtue must be this third thing, a "state of the soul." It must have something to do with how well-off we are in relation to our feelings, which include happiness and sadness (cf. Aristotle's discussion of pleasure and pain in acting, 1104b5-10). Irwin (in Aristotle (1999):196) notes that since the virtues and vices are things that are the objects of praise and blame, this must also mean that these states of the soul are somehow states that have to do with voluntary actions. For Aristotle, virtue (having the virtues, i.e. possessing a virtuous character) is also voluntary, and in our power - as he says in 1113b5-10, “virtue is up to us, and so also, in the same way, is vice. For when acting is up to us, so is not acting, and when no is up to us, so is yes." Virtue is a state that is intimately bound up with our practical rationality, meaning our judgment about how (and why) to act. And, virtues eventually become a real part of the fabric of our
character. Indeed, the virtues are identified plurally as *hexeis* (from singular *hexis*, 'a having' or 'a holding')\(^{19}\) This means that such states are dispositions to act with regularity and predictability, since we 'have' or 'hold' them in our soul.

**III. Virtue, Desire, & Voluntary Action**

Aristotle makes the link between these states of the soul and voluntary action explicit when he indicates that virtue is “a state [of the soul] that *decides*, consisting in a mean, the mean relative to us, which is defined by reference to reason... It is a mean between two vices” (1107a1-3, emphasis mine). The Greek word *prohairesis*, often translated as 'choice' or 'decision', is what Charles Chamberlain (1984: 147) calls “central” to the whole project of Aristotle's ethics. One cannot have virtue without making the right kinds of decisions, but the term *prohairesis*, as Chamberlain notes, eludes a “conclusive description” or definition due to cultural and linguistic complications (148). Put briefly, this is a heavily loaded term for which we do not have a truly accurate understanding. This uncertainty has made it appealing for many writers to adopt a simplistic or 'shallow' interpretation of the term. Under such a reading, *prohairesis* is effectively identified as choosing or deciding among certain options; that is, it would be 'choice' in the most obvious sense.

Following Chamberlain, I propose that reading *prohairesis* as simply choosing or deciding is not quite appropriate. My own reason for rejecting the shallow reading is that it omits the way in which the choice is made, and ignores a key distinction in the

\(^{19}\) cf. Irwin (in Aristotle (1999):196)
Irwin (in Aristotle (1999): 322) remarks that there is a difference between hairesis (choice without deliberation or decision) and prohairesis (requiring deliberation and decision, and literally read as 'choosing before'). Simply choosing to do could be the product of a wish, a false belief, or of spirit or appetite. If this is the case, then it is merely a hairesis action. But, if the agent does as a result of solid reasoning, itself based on the correct application of knowledge and judgment, then it counts as a prohairesis action. Prohairesis is the result of what Aristotle calls 'fine' or 'excellent' deliberation (cf. 1142b18-1143a). But if this deep reading is preferable, what does it mean to say that an agent has deliberated finely, or exhibited prohairesis behavior?

Chamberlain elaborates on this second sense of prohairesis, and suggests that a translation of 'choice' ought to be replaced with “the concord of reason and desire” (152), or “the process by which the orders of reason are brought upon desire so as to change it” (151). Thus, we are wrong to translate the term via another singular term. Instead, we must define prohairesis via what it represents as a process that, realistically, could go on much of a person's lifetime. It takes on a procedural character that is not adequately captured by the shallow rendering of 'choice' or 'decision.' Given Aristotle's picture of the soul as something bicameral, with a rational and a non-rational part, this understanding makes sense — especially if we remember that virtues of character

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20 Irwin reminds us that the 'before' here has two senses, temporal and preferential. So, a prohairesis choice is, all things being equal, made by the agent prior to action (i.e. stems from a kind of disposition) and in the case of a virtuous person, it represents an action that should be chosen before (e.g. over) others.

21 The idea here is that one chamber of the psyche is rational (commanding, as it were) while the other is non-rational (desiring and appetitive, but subordinate to reason). The individual seeks to use reason to mold or shape the desiring part of his soul, as is explained in the next paragraph.
involve the appropriate actions, done in the right way, including the right feelings.

*Prohairesis* – the backbone of an Aristotelian virtuous character – is “the process of consciously deciding to form and of forming a new desire” (153). Whereas certain readings of Aristotle make it sound like *prohairesis* is equivalent to just choosing some action after deliberating, Chamberlain appropriately points out that “[m]erely selecting from deliberation, however, constitutes only the beginning of a *prohairesis* […] the *orexis* must be changed accordingly” (*Ibid.*). Correct *prohairesis* will involve the rational part of the soul acting upon the non-rational, appetite-driven part of the soul. We subject our non-rational desires to our rational faculty and, hopefully and over time, we are able to establish an agreement between them. Hence, a prohairetic action issues from a soul whose reasons and desires are in the right kind of agreement.  

Finally, Chamberlain presents another reason against simply reading ‘decision’ for this term: a ‘decision’ “seems to be a mental act which happens quickly (cf. the discussion between *hairesis* and *prohairesis* a few paragraphs ago), whereas *prohairesis* refers to a process, one which necessarily extends over time and requires effort” (155). Given that Aristotle spends much time discussing how one must have the proper feelings regarding the proper actions to be virtuous, this reading of Chamberlain’s makes good sense. Time and experience are necessary for good deliberation and good choices; poor choices (or lucky guesses) can be made by anyone.

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22 Literally ‘desire’, but typically used to identify an unreflective and appetitive desire
23 *Prohairesis* is never used to identify the harmony between vicious desires and vicious behaviors
24 Corroborated at 1111b5-10, where Aristotle says that “the actions we do on the spur of the moment are said to be voluntary, but not to accord with decision.”
To make the deep reading more intelligible, I use a simple case: I have a non-rational desire to eat cookies every evening before bed. I know fully well that this is a desire that, all things considered, I probably shouldn't be having. It is leading me to gain weight, etc., but it's just something that I am given over to doing. However, I am able to reflect on this, and I understand that it isn't a healthy habit to load up on sugar and starch before my body lies dormant for eight hours. I work on this and fight my cookie-desire with great discipline and devotion. Over time, I am able to shape my desire to my rationality and eventually a new sort of desire is formed from the old one. We can even say that the new desire supplants the old one. I become a person who does not want to eat cookies before bed (or, conversely, I become the person who wants to eat sensibly before bed time). I have brought my desires into rational accord with the (good) goal of being healthy.

There is a parallel here between the mundane cookie example and the more substantial concern of a person's character traits as they relate to their desires. We need to work towards wanting to want to be a certain kind of person, e.g. wanting to want to be just, or charitable, or magnanimous. We must use our rationality (and willpower!) to undergo prohaireses when necessary, in order to overcome our defects of character. Eventually, it is hoped, we can transcend (e.g.) wanting to want justice to achieve the deep sense of wanting justice.

Prohairesis involves decisions, and decisions can only be made regarding actions that are voluntary, i.e. “up to us” (cf. 1113b5-10). Aristotle shows how the virtues, like
not eating cookies before bedtime, are up to us and within our power. All we must do is possess the correct evaluative understanding of our desires and work towards reconciling them with what reason suggests to us.

**IV. Character & Habit**

Virtue, when had properly, is a state which helps the individual identify the right and intermediate course of action between the vicious courses of excess and deficiency. As I have indicated above, a virtue is also a character trait that has been molded by *prohairesis* so that we desire to have it and exercise it. But, it is still unclear how our character traits really form our 'characters' in the robust sense. That is, we understand that the brave person desires to be brave, and is able to act with the right feelings, etc. when he does brave things. But, what ensures that he will act bravely this afternoon just as he did last week? Can I count on him to be brave tomorrow? How does one become a brave *person* rather than just sometimes acting bravely?

These states become a deep part of us when we act in certain ways over and over again. We saw before that they are *hexeis*, 'holdings' of our soul. Virtue (and vice) are states of character which, when performed regularly, will solidify into reliable dispositions to feel and act in certain ways: "to sum it up in a single account [...] a state [of character] results from [the repetition of] similar activities [...] it is not unimportant, then, to acquire one sort of habit or another, right from our youth. On the contrary, it is very important, indeed all-important" (1103b20-25). The process of becoming virtuous,
then, is all about acquiring the right sorts of habits in feeling and action. We have to
cultivate the right kinds of *hexeis* in order to ensure that we act reliably well whenever
we have to act.

Jonathan Jacobs (2004), in discussing Aristotle, puts it succinctly thus:

> Early on we acquire good or bad dispositions as a result of habituation, as a result of being encouraged to find certain activities and ends pleasurable and others the opposite, and of being rewarded in certain ways and discouraged or punished in others. However, this is not a mechanical process of conditioning. It is a shaping of voluntariness (112).

What's clear here is that Aristotle believes that as we keep doing good or bad actions
our *psyche* will begin to become habituated to these kinds of actions and a state of character will emerge. We must begin somewhere, and the process of acquiring the right habits begins with performing the right actions and learning to associate them with pleasure. This is often referred to as one's moral education, and is the process whereby we become used to doing good things. We can all recall being told to be kind to our siblings, and to be honest and truthful. The lesson is driven home by the imposition of punishments for failing to uphold these standards along with rewards if we manage to uphold them particularly well. This associative reinforcement is important to habituation and character development because our "actions... control the sorts of states we acquire" (1103b33). A.E. Taylor (1955, in Miller, 1974) explains further:

> The effect of training is to convert the indeterminate tendency into a fixed habit. We may say, then, that moral goodness is a fixed state of the soul produced by habituation. By being trained in habits of endurance, self mastery, and fair dealing, we acquire the kind of character to which it is pleasing to act bravely, continently, and fairly, and disagreeable to act unfairly, profligately, or like a coward. When habituation has brought about this result the moral excellences in question have become part of
our inmost self and we are in full possession of goodness of character. In a word, it is by repeated doing of right acts that we acquire the right kind of character (311). Habituation is effective insofar as we come to value and take pleasure in certain kinds of actions, hence Aristotle's discussion of virtuous actions as opposed to virtuous characters. A person may perform a just action, but for it do be done *justly* (as the just person would do it), the person has to have decided on that action just because it was the just thing to do in the situation - it must be done from a "firm and unchanging state" of character (1105a34), which includes the disposition to act and feel a certain way. This is most easily adduced after one has acted, but as N.J.H. Dent (1984:8) writes, "these retrospective reactions to what we have done are all of a piece with the prospective reactions of being [e.g.] glad to help or resenting having to help, which then also should be taken as a sign of states of character. Of course, they are but *one* sign, and states of character incorporate much more than this - a man's motives, feelings, and ends as well." Thus, it is not enough to habituate ourselves to telling the truth when we, say, break a vase or a lamp. Rather, we must habituate ourselves to doing it out of a commitment to the rightness of the action, and we must also habituate ourselves to tell the truth with the right kinds of emotions. That such things are observed proves, to Aristotle, that his account is empirically adequate and that character is a correct explanation for human behavior.

Moreover, and perhaps most importantly for the present inquiry, Aristotle reminds us in the *Eudemian Ethics* (hereafter *EE*) that "character (ēthos), as the word
itself indicates, is developed from habit (ethos); and anything is habituated which, as a result of guidance which is not innate, through being changed a certain way repeatedly, is eventually capable of acting in that way..." (1220a39-1220b3). Our character includes the sum of our habits, good and bad. At some point, the guidance we receive during our moral education will firm up our habits into a state of character. We are still responsible for this state, and can work to change it prohairetically, but the plasticity of a hexis (once held) is relatively low. To modify the old adage, a tiger doesn't easily change his stripes once he gets them.

V. Practical Reason (Phronesis) & Action

Throughout the preceding discussion, I have made passing references to the notion of phronesis and identified it as prudence, practical wisdom, or practical rationality.25 These translations, though, are misleadingly simple. Just as the term prohairesis had a shallow and a deep reading, so does phronesis. A simple rendering of 'prudence' (e.g.) as something like 'caution', 'care', or 'frugality' does not capture enough. This much is suggested by Irwin (in Aristotle (1999): 345). Aristotle explicitly says that prudence involves a “correct supposition” about the end itself, which in this case is human happiness. One can be clever, careful, and cautious in action, though, and fail to have laid down happiness as his end. Further, one can exercise a great deal of prudence qua caution and fail to achieve happiness. These cases demonstrate that a

25 In what follows, I use ‘prudence’, ‘practical wisdom’, and ‘practical rationality’ interchangeably along with the term phronesis itself. This is in acknowledgment of the many shades of meaning that the word evokes in its most philosophical sense.
narrow reading is insufficient, and ignore the eudaimonistic root of Aristotle's theory.

What, then, would a deeper reading look like?

*Phronesis* is an intellectual virtue, according to Aristotle, and it is the *sine qua non* of ethical virtue due to its role in deliberation and decision (and thus in *prohaireses*). Irwin (*Ibid.*) chooses to translate the word as 'prudence' and notes that it is “good deliberation about things that contribute to one's own happiness in general... resulting in a correct supposition about the end... which in turn is the principle of further correct deliberation.” Further, “[s]ince it is deliberative, prudence is about things that promote ends[...] But it is also correct supposition about the end [...] It] finds the right actions to be done [...] and] is both necessary and sufficient for complete virtue of character” (*Ibid.*). This is an example of the more substantial, deeper interpretation of *phronesis* which preserves the context of the *Ethics*.

Aristotle devotes a section of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to the subject of prudence (understood in the way just mentioned) and demonstrates how it works and what it requires. At 1140b5-10, he defines prudence generally to mean “a state grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about things that are good or bad for a human being.” Prudence also involves deliberating well, as this is “the function of the prudent person more than anyone else” (cf. 1141B10-11). The supremely good deliberator is the one “whose aim accords with rational calculation in pursuit of the best good for a human being that is achievable in action” (1141B12-15). By "rational

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26 There is reason to believe that *phronesis*, though of the intellect, also is a kind of habit or *hexis* of the mind. That is, good judgment functions like a disposition of the character because it underlies such dispositions and is just as reliable as the good acts that issue from it.
calculation', Aristotle is discussing instrumental reasoning, i.e. the best route to take given one's situation and the end to which one aspires. *Phronesis* would be placed within the rational part of the soul. Specifically, it is an intellectual virtue which allows one to develop the virtues of character by being able to decide on the best course of action.

Therefore, the prudent person must also have knowledge of “particulars” (features of the situation) as well as knowledge of “universals” (something like general rules or laws) since prudence “is concerned with action and action is about particulars.” But, *phronesis* is also heavily concerned with a kind of awareness (cf. Irwin in Aristotle (1999): 345; McDowell (1979)) of the features of a situation, which allow for *prohairesis* to take place. That is, prudence may enable an agent to choose an action before he has the time to fully deliberate about it. This will be discussed more fully in Chapter Four, since it is one facet of my rebuttal to the situationists. In fact, it is this attunement or awareness which is of supreme importance to any post-situationist understanding of practical judgment, especially when it is augmented by progressive insights into one's social situations and contexts.

A specific understanding of just what qualifies as 'prudent' is seen in the *Ethics* 1106a30-1107a5, in which section Aristotle discusses the intermediate condition (the 'mean') as the best in all cases. This is because he sees that it avoids two opposite poor conditions, one being excess and the other being deficiency. In terms of objects, he says that what is perfectly made is that thing to which “nothing could be added or
subtracted... [for] excess or deficiency ruins a good [result], whereas the mean preserves it” (1106b10-14). Thus, the phrase used above in Section III, that virtue is the state which decides on the mean in each action (cf. 1107a1-3), is more intelligible. Since virtue is about acting well, and *phronesis* helps an agent to settle on fine and intermediate actions, these fine (virtuous) actions are the 'intermediate' courses and therefore the best. They are neither deficient (involving too little action) or excessive (involving too much action), nor is the manner of their performance deficient or excessive in any way.

This, then, is the link between prudence as it has been discussed and how one can come to reliably act well. The agent must make a habit out of deliberating well, and finely, about actions. He may then form a reliable and correct character, which is equivalent to being a virtuous person.

**VI. The Explanatory & Predictive Power of Character**

Aristotle’s appeal to character is an earnest attempt to provide a psychological explanation for how human beings seem to act with regularity and predictability. It is also a discussion of what makes certain of these actions good, or fine, and why their opposites detract from a *eudaimon* life.

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27 While it is germane to a summary of Aristotle's position overall, Lesley Brown's “What is the Mean 'Relative to Us' in Aristotle's Ethics?” (1997) makes an interesting argument here that the intermediate condition is not agent-relative. That is, in the famous Milo example, the reader is neither Milo nor a novice athlete, but the trainer who is trying to determine how much food should be given to each. Normally we think that Milo needs more food – like a more virtuous person, his bar is set higher. However, less moral effort is required by a novice (just as less food is needed by the other athlete). Thus, the mean is relative to the agents involved. But Brown argues that there is only one right answer if we are the trainer – Milo needs to eat X, and the novice needs to eat Y. All good trainers will see this and act on it, just as all virtuous people would do roughly the same thing in a situation.
A person’s actions are good because that person has good kinds of dispositions, issuing from good states of the psyche which allows them to regularly decide on the right course of action. These are entrenched hexeis which, thanks to reinforcement and habituation, will ensure that the person consistently and reliably acts well. The source of motivation and action is the character traits themselves, loco interiore, rather than things external to the agent. Though these outside circumstances do matter in the larger description of an event, this is only because they provide a scene against which a person displays trait-issued behavior. Card (2004), interprets the view as follows:

A reference to traits is the primary variable in explanations and moral judgments of actions on a pure aretaic perspective. A mere appeal to features of a situation is not considered sufficient to properly explain our behavior. While some external conditions matter for the possession of a virtuous trait, it is the trait itself that is of central importance. An Aristotelian virtue ethic is [therefore] an example of a pure aretaic perspective (474).

This account allows Aristotle to explain regularities in action, but it has the added function of allowing us to predict behavior once we know someone, and why our predictions are usually right. For example, you decide to meet a friend for coffee and conversation. You surmise that this friend, who is typically arrogant, will be arrogant in this case too. So, when he does eventually boast about himself and his impressive recent achievements, we chalk that up to his trait of (or disposition towards) arrogance. We can easily explain his past behavior, and we have predicted his future behavior successfully by citing some aspect of our friend's character.

The explanatory and predictive power of character traits, good and bad, is
something that we rely on in quotidian life and its innumerable social interactions. We
can plan our own lives better when we see other people acting from entrenched traits,
and this also makes their behavior intelligible for us. This point is echoed by Goldie
(2004: 4): "[w]e use personality discourse to describe people, to judge them, to enable
us to predict what they will think, feel and do, and to enable us to explain their thoughts,
feelings and actions."

Aristotle's use of character discourse has two important aspects for
contemporary virtue ethicists. First, as mentioned, it is a philosophically- and
psychologically-motivated account of human behavior. This can be accepted or rejected,
in whole or piecemeal, as each philosopher deems appropriate to their respective
projects. However, it also demonstrates a vital social practice that humans engage in,
being the use of a *heuristic* to interpret and predict the behavior of others (and, typically,
of oneself). Whether or not Aristotle's picture is completely accurate is a contentious
empirical matter. The situationist psychologists (as I discuss in the next chapter) deny
that the empirical facts support Aristotelian psychology as it has been outlined here.
They reject the claim that (i) Aristotelian psychology is empirically accurate.

However, the observation that we *do* use character language extensively is
equally empirical, but nowhere near as contentious as Aristotle's psychological theory.
The question turns, then, from an empirical into a normative one: *ought we* to use
character language when discussing behavior, and especially in ethical evaluations of
persons and actions? Again, the situationists will respond with a firm “No”. If we reject
the psychology, we must reject the language and concepts of that view as well. Thus, the situationist would also reject the claim that (ii) we should still talk freely in Aristotelian psychological terms. It is my aim in the next chapter to discuss how two specific situationists, John Doris and Gilbert Harman, respond to claims (i) and (ii). I will review their arguments and analyze what I take their core commitments to be. Taken as a whole, then, Chapter Two will thoroughly examine the situationist challenge to AVE.
Chapter Two

*A character is a caricature.*

- Ernest Hemingway

Chapter Summary

This chapter sets out the situationist challenge to virtue ethics and explains why such a challenge is damaging for an ethical theory like Aristotle's, which takes character (i.e. the collection of one's broad, robust character traits) as the central ethical concept.

The chapter focuses on the work of John Doris and Gilbert Harman, who argue that there are no robust or substantial character traits of the kind that Aristotle relies upon. Doris suggests a kind of revised virtue ethics as a solution to the situationist challenge, while Harman proposes a much more extreme solution: he counsels us to stop talking about characters altogether!

I. Situationism's Dispute with Aristotelian Characterology

The overarching concern of this dissertation is the tension between Aristotelian virtue ethics (AVE) and situationist psychology that has existed in one form or another for several decades, but has only more recently become a part of philosophical
investigation and theorizing.\textsuperscript{28} To that end, it is not necessary to review the years upon years of experimental data that situationist experiments have produced, nor to demonstrate a genealogy of that particular tradition. Instead, it is sufficient to take a focused look at how such information is brought to bear on ethical theories like AVE, which have the idea of a person's character as their central component.

We saw in the last chapter that Aristotle took character to be important because of its predictive and explanatory value in human life, and wrote extensively on the topic as the bedrock of his moral psychology. Our character is the bundle of reasons and dispositions (traits, \textit{hexeis}) that we deploy in everyday life, and it also determines the kinds of emotions we feel upon having to interact with the world. To be virtuous, then, is to have a virtuous kind of character; that is, to have the \textit{right} kinds of dispositions, reasons, feelings, etc.

What is the problem with this? It is an ancient theory, and one that has gone largely unquestioned in the West. One needs only to look around at corporate and academic agendas to see terms like “character-building exercise” still enjoying frequent usage in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. This surely means that Aristotle's remarks on character are correct and relevant (or at least on the right track), no?

Situationists argue that what Aristotle took as empirically manifest is actually very badly mistaken. Aristotle misinterpreted and/or failed to sufficiently analyze the observations he gathered about behavior and moral psychology. Or, he simply did not

\textsuperscript{28} cf. Doris (2010)'s footnote, p. 356, about situationism's “80-year research tradition”, though only 20 or so years have really found situationism under real consideration by moral philosophers.
use the same experimental rigor with which modern psychologists conduct experiments. Rather, he abductively inferred a best explanation and went about his business. But, 20th and 21st century experiments have produced reasons for people to regard character with some skepticism. Doris (2010: 356-57) explains more about this disagreement in a section titled “Skepticism about Character”:

The dispute concerns the extent to which there are robust character traits. As we understand this presumption, “a person [who] has a robust character trait can confidently be expected to display trait-relevant behavior across a wide variety of trait-relevant situations, even where some or all of these situations are not optimally conducive to such behavior” [...] The virtues are paradigmatic examples of such traits: if one possesses the virtue of courage, for example, one is expected to behave consistently courageously when it is ethically appropriate to do so, despite the presence of inducements to behave otherwise [...] The trouble comes from a long “situationist” experimental tradition in social psychology [...] which is] not aberrational, but representative: social psychologists have repeatedly found that the difference between good conduct and bad appears to reside in the situation more than the person; both disappointing omissions and appalling actions are readily induced through seemingly minor situations.

The situationists argue inductively, from past experimental results, that there are no such things as robust character traits. Further, one discerns a split in the argument between experiments which argue against robust helping traits, and those which argue for the ease with which horrible behavior can be produced.

The core of the “situationist challenge” to AVE, as it regards helping traits, is this: Aristotle claims that we have such robust traits, the hexeis built from habitual actions. And, insofar as these are action-guiding, we would expect that they would manifest themselves whenever that kind of trait was called for. But, experiments show that the opposite is true, e.g. people do not act as we would expect them to act if they had
certain robust character traits. Thus, there are no robust traits.

Such an argument is obviously disappointing to anyone sympathetic to AVE, or even who believes strongly in the idea of character without adhering to one or another ethical theory. What makes the situationist argument even more persuasive is that it, too, is empirical. Where Aristotle claims support for his theory out of observations about human beings, so too do the situationists! What we have, then, is a real scientific disagreement about whether or not character, in the robust sense noted above, really exists.

Summarizing Doris (Ibid.), some of the major experiments from the latter-half of the 20th century in support of this particular situationist stance on character are comprised of the following. [Note that these are not the only experiments which Doris uses to support his claim about character, but they are the most representative of the kinds of worries that situationists have. In fact, philosophical situationism relies on something like eight decades of experimental evidence, which lead Doris and others to take these results as established facts about human psychological fragmentation.] Here, then, are what Doris sees as the most worrisome experiments of the past few decades:

1. Isen and Levin (1972) discovered that finding a dime made subjects “22 times more likely” to demonstrate helping behavior than those who did not find a dime.

2. Darley and Batson (1973) reported that subjects made to feel rushed were much less ready to help a distressed confederate than those not in a hurry. (The at-ease subjects were “6 times more likely to help” than the others.)

3. Mathews and Cannon (1975) found that ambient noise levels had a dire effect on what is decidedly ethical behavior: “subjects were 5 times more likely to help
When ambient noise was at normal levels than when a power lawnmower was running nearby.”

Why are these so unsettling to us? Well, the usual assumption is that most of us have pretty decent characters and would engage in low-cost helping behavior whenever we could. Doris (2002: 31), borrowing from Judith Jarvis Thomson, calls these cases of 'minimally decent samaritanism' which “do not require heroic commitment or sacrifice.” Of course, there are the 'bad apples' that would not demonstrate any helping behavior whatsoever, but they ought to make up the minority of subjects.

If we accept the above idea about helping behavior, then we seem committed to the (assumed) claim that most of us have more or less robust traits of something like generosity, or justice, or some kind of virtue that governs appropriate helping actions. If those assumptions are true, then why did so many people fail to help (and for seemingly irrelevant, non-ethical reasons)? For example, why should ambient noise help determine whether or not I am a good person? This seems to fly in the face of what Aristotle has set forth about character and virtue, and is a very real, very serious contention that AVE will have to address.

However, there are also the experiments which make no such assumptions about the potential goodness of human beings; rather, they show that situations can

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29 This wouldn't mean we always behave correctly, but that perhaps 8 times out of 10 we act generously, justly, etc. Even Aristotle admitted that full virtue was incredibly rare, so there is no reason to stretch the assumption more than necessary here.

30 One need not be committed to thinking of humans as having innate good character to be convinced by situationism; all they argue is that the correlation between situational factors and observed behavior is enough to suggest the absence of character traits both virtuous and vicious, it would seem.
sometimes lead people to committing atrocious acts of cruelty and violence. For example, Haney et al. (1973) discovered that students assigned to play the guards in a simulated prison experiment “rapidly descended into pervasive cruelty and abuse.”

Further, Milgram (1974) found that subjects were willing to initiate punishment of a victim, even when the victim feigned distress and pain, at just the “polite request” of the experimenter. The repugnant behavior of the subjects is, the situationists argue, the outcome of situational pressures exerted on them. I will now examine these in more depth, since these two arguments form a core part of John Doris’ pro-situationist argument in *Lack of Character*.

Doris (2002: 35) discusses the (in)famous Milgram sessions of the early 1960s., in which a majority of “subjects drawn from various socioeconomic groups in the New Haven area” administered what they thought to be near-lethal electric shocks to an unseen experimental confederate (as a punishment for perceived disobedience). Of course, this was a simulated situation, but it is astounding to witness how ‘everyday’ people could be brought to inflict such pain against others simply due to the presence (and thus perceived authority) of a man in a white lab coat.

So, what should we take away from this very disturbing piece of the situationist puzzle? Can we assume that human beings (or at least some of them in Connecticut) are mad torturers? Of course not. According to Doris (2002: 42), “[t]he experiment does not suggest that Milgram had stumbled onto an aberrant pocket of sadists in the New Haven

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31 This is not to be confused with Zimbardo's earlier (1971) experiment, known as the “Stanford Prison Experiment”, which found essentially the same results.
area and still less does it suggest that all of us are a bunch of meanies […] What [is highlighted], once more, is the power of the situation…” The idea here is that these everyday people\textsuperscript{32} would not comply with the experimenters’ insistence to shock the ‘victims’ of the session. But, Milgram’s results are offered up as substantial testimony to the fact that the power of the situation is the most important, and sometimes overriding, factor in determining human behavior. And, even though there were some subjects who refused to obey the experimenters, we are not justified in assuming they would exhibit such vice-defying behavior in other dissimilar situations. As Doris (2002: 48-49) remarks, “[t]here’s little reason for confidence that the disobedient subjects, however inspiring their behavior in the experiment […], could be counted on to exhibit Socratic self-mastery in other situations.”

Doris continues his discussion with the Stanford Prison Experiment conducted by Philip Zimbardo in the early 1970s, wherein “[m]ale college students with no history of crime, emotional disability, physical handicap, or intellectual and social disadvantage” were chosen to participate and randomly assigned the role of ‘guard’ or ‘prisoner’ (Doris 2005: 51). The idea was to simulate a prison environment in the basement of the psychology building at Stanford University, in order to study the interactions that developed. However, due to the chaotic results early on, it was terminated after only six days of the planned two-week duration (\textit{Ibid.}).

What could have happened to alarm the experimenters to the point of terminating the exercise? Doris (2002: 51, citing Haney et al. 1973 and Haney and

\footnote{Who may – or may not – be assumed to possess minimally decent samaritanism}
Zimbardo 1977) relates that “[f]ive prisoners were released prematurely due to 'extreme emotional depression, crying, rage and acute anxiety' [...] one subject developed a psychosomatic rash over portions of his body [...] yet conversely] most of the guards seemed to enjoy their roles [...] improvising] all manner of creative sadisms such as requiring prisoners to clean out toilets with their bare hands.” In only a few days, the situation devolved into a prisoner riot, which was “quashed by guards hosing down prisoners with fire extinguishers” (Doris 2005: 51). At this point, the experiment was deemed unsafe to participants and it was cancelled.

One might ask whether or not this proves the situationist point, since the simulation was just that – a *simulation* of a prison environment rather than an exact facsimile. Doris argues that a flawed simulation would actually make the situationist point even more clearly: “[i]Indeed, the experiment's 'unreality' is what makes it so shocking. The participants were volunteers in a short-term experiment; unlike individuals in actual corrections systems, this was not 'their life.' Still, there was a precipitous descent into barbarism” (Doris 2002: 52-53). What is even more surprising is (like some of the Milgram subjects) most guards were shocked at their own behavior. Doris explains that the guards “did not always endorse their [own] behavior” (e.g. “the 'pacifist' guard's dismay as he force-fed an inmate”, and whose “sentiments accorded with those expressed by other guards”) (2002: 53). The guard in question's thoughts are reproduced from Doris (2002: 51) below, originally taken from Haney and Zimbardo (1977):
Prior to Start of Experiment:  
As I am a pacifist and non-aggressive individual, I cannot see a time when I might maltreat other living things.

On Day Five:  
This new prisoner, 416, refuses to eat. That is a violation of Rule Two: “Prisoners must eat at mealtimes,” and we are not going to have any of that kind of shit.... Obviously we have a troublemaker on our hands. If that’s the way he wants it, that’s the way he gets it. We throw him into the Hole [solitary confinement] ordering him to hold greasy sausages in each hand. After an hour, he still refuses.... I decide to force feed him, but he won't eat. I let the food slide down his face. I don't believe it is me doing it. I just hate him more for not eating [than I hate myself for doing it].

As is evident from this excerpt, the individual's self-report at the beginning of the experiment conflicts dramatically with his thoughts and actions after only five days of simulated prison. However, what is most disturbing is that the guard somehow understands that he is the same person who would never 'maltreat other living things', yet does not want to accept that he is violating the dignity of his 'prisoner' when he smears food all over his face in a solitary holding cell. If Doris is correct, then this shift towards an obscene 'barbarism' is to be blamed on the modest situational pressures of the situations found in the basement prison; modest, but enough to set the stage for atrocious behavior.

Just as the guards acted cruelly, it seems that they did so without any exuberance or joy. Indeed, like many Milgram subjects, they performed vicious actions to other human beings with a strong sense of inner turmoil and conflicting feelings. This addresses the potential objection to situationism that all (or most) of the samples
contained people who were just plain bad people! This would explain why so many experimental atrocities were committed in these experiments. However, the situationist argues against this claim by citing just that inner conflict; wouldn't a vicious person act joyfully in performing his evils? The fact that conflict exists in the guards (e.g.) means that “[e]ven for the worst of people, dispositional structures are not evaluatively integrated; they defy the logic of characterological psychology” (Doris 2005: 58). This explains, again, how competing or oppositely-valued dispositions can 'cohabitate' in the same personality, which is one of the chief commitments of the situationist. This is a realization that Doris (2002: 58) extends to Nazi death camp staff members, claiming that “if evil is as evil does, the Nazis were the most evil of men. But their evil, I contend, is not easily understood as a function of global character structures.” Even Joseph Mengele “did not present as a unity [of cruelty]: [a] prisoner doctor referred to Mengele as 'l'homme double'” for his inconsistent behavior, such as extreme kindness and attention to the small children he would eventually condemn to the ovens (Ibid.).

Very well; the most important pieces of experimental evidence for the general situationist argument have been put forward. I now examine, in detail, the overall arguments offered by John Doris and Gilbert Harman, which form the contemporary situationist challenge that specifically attacks the Aristotelian ethical tradition. In what follows, I set out their central commitments and reasons for dismissing the idea of

33 For example, this is a common reply from someone who endorses AVE; or, in a less extreme form, she would say that most people aren't fully virtuous, and maybe barely continent individuals. So, it is no surprise that most people acted wrongly in these contexts... virtue is the rara avis and we shouldn't expect otherwise. However, I will refrain from making this argument against situationism since it has been articulated by many others. Moreover, though, I do not think it is the strongest argument that can be mustered to defend AVE; I will say more about this in the next chapter.
robust character traits (Doris), or character traits altogether (Harman).

II. The Specific Challenges to Character: Doris' Situationism

If the core of the situationist challenge is presented above, then the works by Doris and Harman each represent a refinement and delineation of that more general empirical tradition. These authors make the important move of evaluating and assessing the evidence of the situationist experimenter, which prompts them to offer normative claims about how we should (or perhaps shouldn't) talk about our characters.

In Doris' main work, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior*, he discusses the school of thought known as 'globalism' about character traits. I give his treatment of the “three theses” of globalism verbatim in the following chart (cf. Doris 2005: 22-23).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consistency</th>
<th>Character and personality traits are reliably manifested in trait-relevant behavior across a diversity of trait-relevant eliciting conditions that may vary widely in their conduciveness to the manifestation of the trait in question.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>Character and personality traits are reliably manifested in trait-relevant behaviors over iterated trials of similar trait-relevant eliciting conditions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluative Integration</td>
<td>In a given character or personality the occurrence of a trait with a particular evaluative valence is probabilistically related to the occurrence of other traits with similar evaluative valences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2.1 – The Three Theses of Globalism**

The main problem with globalism, according to Doris, is that it simply is not supported by science. The bottom line is that “[s]ystematic observation typically fails to reveal the behavioral patterns expected by globalism; *globalist conceptions of personality are*
empirically inadequate” (23). If this is true (as Doris will argue), then this helps us understand cases where laudable virtues cohabit with disheartening vices, like when an “upstanding civil servant [is] a faithless husband” or a “scholar [is] both diligent and honest in her research [... but not] in her teaching” (21).

What, then, ought we to understand as the empirically adequate picture of character psychology? Doris (2005: 64) argues that there are many layers and competing dispositions inside each of us, and they are more or less likely to be activated depending on the features of whatever situations we happen to find ourselves in. “I therefore contend that personality should be conceived of as fragmented,” argues Doris, calling for us to see personality as “an evaluatively disintegrated association of situation-specific local traits” (Ibid.). He then provides four observations from his discussion (cf. Doris 2005: 64-65) which “tell against globalism and [argue] for the fragmentation hypothesis”.34

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low Consistency</th>
<th>Low consistency correlations suggest that behavior is not typically ordered by robust traits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Situational Determinants</td>
<td>The determinative impact of unobtrusive situational factors undermines attribution of robust traits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Empirical Support</td>
<td>The tenuous relationship found between personality measures and overt behavior leaves globalist accounts of human functioning empirically undersupported</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

34 Doris acknowledges that some people can be very consistent and, in a sense, integrated, but these are not quite what an Aristotelian (e.g.) would want as support for AVE. For instance, a depressive may “reliably exhibit melancholic affect across a wide variety of contexts” and the sociopath “might fail to exhibit compassion across all of his interpersonal behaviors”, but “such consistent behavioral profiles are abnormal or, more judgmentally, pathological and the pathology in an important sense derives from the consistency” (2002: 65).
Disintegration

| Biographical information often reveals remarkable personal disintegration |

**Table 2.2 – Main Objections to Globalism**

Doris argues that we should embrace three certain core commitments of the situationist program, which he dubs the key “theoretical commitments” (24). I reproduce them verbatim below.

| **Behavioral Variation** | Behavioral variation across a population owes more to situational differences than dispositional differences among persons. Individual dispositional differences are not so behaviorally individuating as might have been supposed; to a surprising extent it is safest to predict, for a particular situation, that a person will behave in a fashion similar to the population norm. |
| **The Nature of Traits** | Systematic observation problematizes the attribution of robust traits. People will quite typically behave inconsistently with respect to the attributive standards associated with a trait, and whatever behavioral consistency is displayed may be readily disrupted by situational variation. This is not to deny the existence of stability; the situationist acknowledges that individuals may exhibit behavioral regularity over iterated trials of substantially similar situations. |
| **Personality Organization** | Personality is not often evaluatively integrated. For a given person, the dispositions operative in one situation may have an evaluative status very different from those manifested in another situation; evaluatively inconsistent dispositions may 'cohabitate' in a single personality. |

**Table 2.3 – The Three Commitments of Situationism**

The upshot of these situationist commitments is that two of the three theses of globalism are incorrect. Doris explicitly rejects the first and third theses of globalism, yet he leaves open the possibility for a variant of stability (so long as we understand a trait
as something that is highly situation-specific). And, remember that Doris draws the boundaries of a trait very carefully, and very narrowly. Given this, the stability that he posits is commensurately narrow. That is, Doris allows for trait stability given recurring situations, like 'reliable honesty when speaking with his father after 5pm', or 'reliable courage when no bodily harm could result'. We may suppose that people possess highly-specific kinds of traits, and may reliably display trait-relevant behavior when they encounter an appropriate situational cue. However, if someone is, say, speaking with his father at 12 noon, or speaking with his mother at 5pm, we are not entitled to assume his honesty. In fact, we may be disappointed to find out that reliable dishonesty results, thanks to such insignificant situational changes. But, this just is Doris' point: situationism suggests that seemingly insignificant changes can dramatically influence our behavior.

While this represents stability of a kind, it must be noted here that the variant which Doris accommodates lacks the substance of a broader interpretation of trait stability. If we can only understand stability so narrowly, and funneled into such specific channels, then using character language at all seems to serve no practical purpose anymore. Recall that talking in terms of robust traits like honesty, courage, etc. serves a valuable purpose in our lives; trait language helps us to explain and predict behavior, and to answer the question 'What kind of person is this?' Such specific 'situational' descriptions of a person provide little help in these areas, offering only the most minimal of information about an agent. But, perhaps this is something Doris would agree with. After all, he only leaves open the possibility of using character language, like 'trait' and
'stability', but doesn't explicitly endorse such an option. This just may be a concession on the situationist's part to the nostalgic personality theorist in us!

In fact, says the situationist, it is only in the face of great disconfirming evidence that we begin to abandon robust trait attribution, and even then, we only do so with great difficulty. Doris argues that “[p]eople go on blithely in the face of such [behavioral] disappointment and surprise because we are, well, rather blithe. That is, we are remarkably untroubled by experiences that should cause us to doubt what we believe. To put matters a bit more technically, we seem rather limited in our ability to assimilate disconfirming evidence” (101).

But all of this argument has been destructive; the situationist challenge, if it goes through, only does away with a great deal of contemporary theory and practice. Current facts replace outdated assumptions, but what are we left with? The situationist program leaves little in the way of a constructive (read: normative) argument. But, some advice can be gleaned from Doris' later chapters. For instance, in the wake of situationism, we must focus on “attending to the determinative features of situations. We should try, so far as we are able, to avoid 'near occasions of sin' – ethically dangerous circumstances. At the same time, we should seek near occasions for happier behaviors” (2002: 147).

This strategy is our best bet for understanding our fixed\textsuperscript{35} local traits, and for making sure that we place ourselves only in situations which are conducive to right action. The recommendation is that we need to cultivate a kind of knowledge about our situations

\textsuperscript{35} Doris treats our local traits as established and insulated against change or amendment; that is, we have certain kinds of narrowly-defined responses that we must cater to when choosing situational contexts in which to place ourselves.
and ourselves, and figure out how to control our environments in such a way that we place ourselves in advantageous contexts as often as possible. This places responsibility on the agent to know his or her own weak spots and situational difficulties (i.e. self-knowledge regarding local traits and defeaters), and encourages discrimination among potential outcomes based on such knowledge. [This is similar in some respects to what Aristotle envisions by *phronesis*, but of course since that prudence is a kind of robust trait (and governs other robust traits) we cannot assume too much of a similarity here. What Doris offers is only the possibility for a very situationally-sensitive ethics in which we cannot speak of broad traits or dispositions, and must be incredibly specific in our language and our conceptions of human action.]

Now, this outcome will not sound appealing to an Aristotelian. The first phase of the situationist challenge, voiced by John Doris, leaves AVE in a pretty bad spot. However, the second phase of the situationist challenge to virtue ethics is even less forgiving. Gilbert Harman's argument in favor of dispensing with talk of character and traits altogether offers a much more extreme stance than Doris' work, in that Harman does not even allow us to speak of *any* traits at all. That is, we cannot even have the specific local traits which Doris makes room for. It is to this very forthright argument that I now turn.

**III. The Specific Challenges to Character: Harman's View**

When we talk about character traits, situationists like Doris will tell us that we are
speaking about something that operates very differently than we think. This much has
been shown above. The situationists want to tell us that appealing to robust character
language at all is an error, much like trying to ascribe a thrown rock’s plummeting to the
ground to the inherent "downward-seekingness" possessed by the rock. (cf. Harman 1999b: 315). In that case, we are formulating an explanation that is perhaps too
convenient or too easy, and ignores other complex forces outside the rock which may
come into play. In the same way, by talking about one's character traits, we may be
imputing psychological phenomena to a person which places the locus of importance
inside the person (perhaps too conveniently) and ignores exterior social forces which
may be the more accurate explanation for behavior. I think Doris would find these points
acceptable, as does Gilbert Harman in the brief articles "No Character or Personality"
(2003), “The Nonexistence of Character Traits” (1999a), and "Moral Philosophy Meets

But, the challenge posed by Harman is even greater to Aristotelian virtue ethics
than that of Doris, since if Harman is right, we cannot even talk of local traits! In fact,
he argues for the position that we are in error to talk about any kind of character
whatsoever! Instead, we should feel obligated to jettison our 'folk psychology' and our
corner language along with it, since each represent an empirical falsehood. Harman
(1999a: 224) justifies his dismissal of characterological 'folk' language thusly: “I believe

36 There may be some far-fetched way to patch together a reworked version of virtue ethics along the lines
that Doris suggests, but Harman would rule out even these specific, situation-specific virtues! Thus, it
seems like the entire virtue ethics enterprise would be halted if his arguments go through, though
Harman (2003:93) mentions that such an absence of robust traits does not undermine agency or
responsibility.
that ordinary thinking in terms of character traits has disastrous effects on people's understanding of each other, on their understandings of what social programs are reasonable to support, and of their understandings of international affairs. I think we need to get people to stop doing this.” Here, then, is how he proceeds.

First, Harman suggests that when we make ascriptions of global character traits, we are acting erroneously and perpetrating what is known as the ‘fundamental attribution error’ (hereafter, FAE). The FAE is representative of “the tendency of observers to infer wrongly that actions are due to distinctive robust character traits rather than to aspects of the situation” and that “[h]aving once attributed a trait to a given person, an observer has a strong tendency to continue to attribute that trait to the person even in the face of considerable disconfirming evidence, a tendency psychologists sometimes call 'confirmation bias’...” (1999a: 223; 2003b: 90).37

Harman (1999b) likens the human lapse into the FAE to the use of 'folk physics' to explain some phenomenon, especially with regard to perceived internal properties or tendencies, rather than trying to appeal to the network of laws and forces which coalesce to produce the phenomenon (cf. the 'rock' discussion a few paragraphs ago). This is a methodological mistake, but it often produces explanations that we find psychologically accurate and warranted. But, Harman is quick to point out, although we may sometimes appear to get things right even if we use poor explanations or strategies, that track record is not sufficient warrant to think that a given approach is the best one.

37 cf. what John Doris (2002) mentioned about this same tendency and the difficulty that we have in accurately making trait attributions, as I discussed in the previous section.
Harman argues that we may be making a similar mistake in moral psychology and moral philosophy when we ascribe interior properties (like a global trait) to some actor. He mentions that “...studies of actual individual differences do not support ordinary assumptions about character traits” (2003: 223). Further, Harman relies on two famous experiments (the Milgram experiments of the 1960s, as well as the “Good Samaritan” experiment conducted by Darley and Batson in the 1970s) to illustrate his point, saying that in the Milgram experiments, we are in error to think that the massive obedient response by subjects is due to a universal character defect (i.e. a vicious streak).

Instead, we should consider how the situational factors and individual perceptions progressed in order to arrive at a more accurate understanding of the experiments, a point that Doris would undoubtedly agree with. Similarly, in the second experiment, what should be an insignificant factor in ethical behavior (namely whether or not one was made to feel 'in a hurry') seemed to bear directly on how the subjects interacted with a confederate who was mimicking pain and distress. The idea is that were there robust (virtuous) character traits like bravery, compassion, etc. then surely more people would have resisted authority or stopped to help a perceived victim in the doorway. Conversely, if there were robust (vicious) traits like callousness, malevolence, or even cold-heartedness, then these people would act this way all the time. There would not have been any of the conflict or inner turmoil that was evidenced by the experimental transcripts, like that of the 'pacifist guard' in the Zimbardo experiment. As Harman asks it, “[i]s it that some theology students are more compassionate than
others? Does the Milgram experiment show that almost everyone is basically evil?”
(2003: 91). Of course not; this clashes with our basic observations of human nature. But,
it does raise severe doubts about the existence of robust traits.38

So, we shouldn't think that everyone is perfectly virtuous, or totally vicious, but
we do think that most people are, generally, pretty decent folks at heart who may slip
from time to time. So, why didn't more people act well? Doris gives us his take, but
interestingly, Harman does not seek to answer that particular question.

However, based on his understanding of our susceptibility to committing the FAE
and the benefits that would result from its acknowledgment – like clearer conceptions of
moral education, praise and blame, et al. - Harman states that “[t]here is no reason at all
to believe in character traits as ordinarily conceived... [w]e need to abandon all talk of
virtue and character, not find a way to save it by reinterpreting it” (2003: 223-224,
emphasis mine). In this way, Harman makes a much more sweeping conclusion than
Doris does; Doris at least leaves open the possibility to salvage something of virtue talk
when he allows for limited local traits. It may only be lip-service in the end, but an
important kind of social practice might still be maintained. Harman, though, sees this as
just another fantasy. So, to discuss behavior, we should resort to much more precise
psychological and perhaps neurological explanations which avoid the vague and general
(but rich) language of character.

Harman acknowledges that the two experiments which he cites do not by

38 Cf. the discussion that Doris (2002) provides about the Milgram experiments and also the Stanford
Prison experiment. Harman relies on a similar interpretation of those experiments for his argument here.
themselves prove that there are no global traits, but “[w]hat they show is that aspects of a particular situation can be important to how a person acts in ways that ordinary people do not normally appreciate, leading them to attribute certain distinctive actions to an agent’s distinctive character rather than to subtle aspects of the situation” (2003: 91). Again, a very similar observation to Doris, but a far grander conclusion: because we fall into the FAE's trap so often, and because it leads to clashes with empirical evidence (and can lead to confusion), Harman believes we need to ditch the character-language altogether. As Harman concludes one of his articles, “Aristotelian style virtue ethics shares with folk psychology a commitment to broad-based character traits of a sort that people simply do not have” (2003: 93, emphasis mine).

Let us assume that Harman’s suggestion here is correct; and people do not have robust traits. Further, that any theory which substantially relies on them is relying on a component that is incredibly nebulous at best, and summarily disproven at worst. The situationists obviously stress the latter outcome, and argue that the traits just do not exist; thus, AVE is to be revised (if not discarded) due to its empirical inadequacy. It would still be possible to promote AVE as a kind of ‘ideal’ to which we can aspire, but this seems quite disingenuous: it hardly seems responsible to suggest that people strive for a state which they could never hope to attain, being barred by their innate psychological limits!

The charge of empirical inadequacy is a substantial one, first and foremost, because we must assume that nobody wishes to embrace a theory that is built around
an outdated, incorrect set of core ideas. But, it is also especially damaging to AVE since Aristotle prided himself on being a rigorous scientist and observer of nature. The *Nicomachean Ethics* was as much descriptive as it was normative, i.e. it provided guidelines for action based upon what are supposed to be facts about human nature, biology, and psychology. Proponents of AVE, or a similar kind of ethical approach, often argue that part of the appeal of Aristotle is his grounding of normative ethics in objective facts about human life.\(^{39}\) So, if the facts here are wrong (because people don't have robust traits!) then this potential attraction to AVE is effectively negated. The empirical point thus comprises both the core of the situationist challenge, as well as its most damaging claim against AVE.

What is a virtue ethicist to do in the face of such a challenge? Is there even a response? In short, yes. Some responses are to 'bite the bullet' and just accept either Doris' or Harman's argument, which entails (I would assume) rejecting AVE in favor of a revised kind of virtue ethics, or else abandoning all talk of virtue and character. However, one can raise several points of contention with the situationist challenge as presented above. In fact, many authors have done just this, with varying degrees of effectiveness.

In the next chapter, I will present certain highlights from the amassed responses to situationism which I agree with, but also offer some of my own criticisms against Doris and Harman. While I cannot review all of this now, here is an effective *precis* of the next section: the situationists have rightly shown Aristotelians just how fragile virtues can be, and how easily we can slip into vice. But, their targets and methodologies are all

\(^{39}\) cf. Hursthouse (1999) to an extent, but also Foot (2001) on this point.
wrong. For example, Harman's reliance on the FAE may itself be a kind of error, and Doris' case against AVE may be built upon a misconstrual of that position. If these strong situationist arguments can be refuted, then perhaps the status of AVE as an appealing and plausible theory can be saved. Indeed, AVE might even benefit from incorporating situationist insights, even if the overall situationist challenge fails in the end.
Chapter Three

_Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary._
_It fulfils the same function as pain in the human body._
_It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things._

- Winston Churchill

Chapter Summary

This third chapter presents objections to the arguments laid out by Doris and Harman in the previous chapter, though I treat them here in reverse order. I first argue against Harman as his is the more extreme claim, and then focus on Doris' _Lack of Character_. Even though both authors present somewhat different conclusions given their interpretation of situationist experimental evidence, there are some areas of overlap in their arguments (and thus there will be some overlap in my collection of objections to each). The general theme of these objections is that there has been some kind of misinterpretation or misapplication of the evidence's significance regarding robust traits, i.e. that the evidence doesn't support the conclusion and that the authors have not established that there are no robust traits. If that is true, I argue that we can once again assume the plausibility of AVE and undertake some illuminating work on the nature of _phronesis_.

55
Ia. The *Rara Avis* Reply to Situationism

Before delving too deeply into the reasons why the situationist challenge falls short, I feel that it is necessary to discuss a common reply to the situationists – one that I will not appeal to, at least in its crude form. This reply is what I term the 'rara avis' consideration, which says that full virtue is something of a rare bird when it comes to human behavior. So, we should not be surprised when we fail to observe people who do not display full virtue; in fact, this is consistent with the conceptual framework that Aristotle puts forward in the *Ethics*, and ought to be expected if we look around us at our peers. In reality, it seems that all one must do to prove the rarity of virtue is open the daily newspaper! Then, what is the problem with using this reply to argue against situationism's array of experimental data?

My contention is that appealing to the *rara avis* is something of a hollow reply to the situationist. If anything, it may even weaken the very position it seeks to strengthen. So, I agree with John Doris (2005: 665) when he suggests that “[t]his 'rarity argument' weakens empirical content and secures empirical adequacy [for AVE] by sharply limiting applicability, maintaining that few individuals in a population will instantiate the relevant psychological structures [for virtue]. This [reduces] the power of characterological moral psychology as an explanatory and predictive theory [... since it omits] the preponderance of subjects.” In short, we need a theory of virtue that can illuminate the moral psychology of most of us, rather than just a small percentage of cases. The rare bird argument also represents a hasty dismissal of the situationist argument without
inquiring into its potential benefits to virtue ethics; it lacks appreciation for the *gravitas* of the situationist main line (that there are subtle, submerged 'fault lines' along which our behavior becomes inconsistent and maybe even strikingly vicious). Although the situationists fail to prove that there are no robust traits, as I argue in this chapter, we can and should take away from their challenge an understanding of character which is much richer. Traits may defy traditional, one-word descriptions like 'justice', 'honesty', or even 'cowardice' due to the influences of various situational factors which the agent (wrongly) adjudges to be morally insignificant. Here, I agree with Doris (2005: 666) when he cites Nomy Arpaly's (2003) skepticism about “'One-Word-in-English character traits'”.

Yes, we should be wary about tossing around character language without properly understanding it. But, this skepticism is only useful if we are thinking of 'honesty' or 'justice' as denoting a certain cross-situational consistency. That is, acting honestly or justly across all possible situations where one *could* so act. This is what situationists like Doris portray the Aristotelian virtues to require. Yet, as I discuss below, this is not what robust traits are about, and this kind of (unreflective, unwavering) consistency may actually not mesh with Aristotelian ideas about virtue. If that's the case, then we ought not to be skeptical about using robust character language after all; we can use it so long as we properly understand the psychological complexity involved.

Finally, and perhaps most egregiously, this reply to situationism misses the actual claim of the situationist argument! Appealing to virtue as the rare bird is a way of

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40 I deny, of course, the full expression of skepticism about traits by Doris, as well as the more forceful point that Arpaly makes in her work about character traits.
maintaining the accuracy of Aristotelian characterology while trying to explain the apparent lack of confirming evidence regarding full virtuous traits. Virtue is possible for some people, but not very many. Yet, situationism makes a much harsher claim about the state of our moral psychology; the situationist argues that virtuous traits (as AVE understands them) aren't just rare, but it are something psychologically unrealizable by human beings. People, according to situationism, just cannot instantiate the relevant psychological structures to even come close to the requirements of a virtuous trait (nor even a vicious trait).

Robust traits are not something that we are capable of. So, the *rara avis* dodge is just that: it misses the point of the situationist critique, and thus does not comprise a sufficient reply. Further, as I've argued, it is too hasty, and precludes any useful theoretical development (like the kind I do in this dissertation) which helps to refine and clarify key parts of AVE. With this note aside, I now turn to the situationist arguments themselves.

I. Critique of Harman

Harman's (1999a, 1999b) argument falls short in a few very important ways. First of all, it should be noted that Harman has not really argued for the pervasiveness nor the permanence of the FAE. He treats it as a proven operational assumption and then traces the consequences of said assumption. As Steve Clarke (2006: 351) puts this point, “Harman appears to believe that [the FAE] is an established scientific result identified by

41 It would be interesting to see studies about the absence of vicious traits, but few (if any) come to light in the body of situationist evidence. [Thanks to Rachel Cohon for pointing this out.]
social psychologists, akin to other entrenched results in science [like gravity or
evolution]. He refers to 'the conclusions of social psychology' [...] which he takes to be
authoritative.” Of course, the claims of social psychology about situationism are quite
striking, but it must be understood that the 'results' of social psychology are far from
entrenched. They are conjectures possessed of higher and lower degrees of
epistemological warrant, and remain open to criticism and debate just like gravity and
evolution qua their status as explanatory theories. This is just a general point about
fallibilism, but it bears repeating at this point in order to understand why Harman's
treatment of the empirical data is in error. By considering the matter closed, Harman
puts an undue burden on himself (and perhaps other situationists who think like him) to
demonstrate just why the matter is settled. At the very least, he must explain why he
treats the results of social psychology in this context as not even open to question. But,
again, this is too general a point against Harman; more specific objections must be
voiced. And, in fact, I offer four criticisms of Harman below, following the pioneering

(1) Harman does not argue for the conclusion that there are no character traits,
only that we are often in error when we attribute global traits to people. The FAE is an
attribution error, but simple attribution says nothing about existence. I may be prone to
attributing presents under my Christmas tree to a hungry, bearded man who comes
down my chimney, yet this attribution says nothing about whether or not Santa Claus
exists. With some effect, Harman argues that our 'folk psychology' does not justify our
typical attributions, and we may fall into the FAE whenever we call someone (e.g.) 'brave' or 'just,' especially given only one or a few observations of that person's actions. While this may be an excellent observation (that we are biased and hasty trait-attributors) it does not directly argue against the existence of robust traits. Harman, as I point out above, treats that piece of information as an already settled affair. However, as I also pointed out above, it is far from being settled or entrenched. Gopal Sreenivasan (2002: 51) shares this point of view, and comments that Harman, in seeking to emphasize “non-trait explanations for temporally stable behavior,” only shows that we may be in error when attributing traits. But, Harman does not prove that the traits are absent from human psychology. We may be able to explain at least some behavior without appealing to character traits. And, we may be wrong in at least some cases of trait ascription to individuals. But, even with these points by Harman acknowledged, Sreenivasan rightly asserts that they does not constitute evidence against the existence of robust traits. He points out that “[w]hat we need to consider instead is whether a warrant to attribute cross-situationally consistent traits can be acquired” (2002: 54-55).

Sreenivasan also extends his worries to philosophical situationism more generally. Often, philosophical situationists cite (psychological) experimental data in order to argue against the existence of robust traits, and by extension our ascriptions of them. For example, situationists often cite Hartshorne and May's (1928) experiment concerning honesty in schoolchildren as a prime example of the narrowness of any
character traits we may have. The children typically had low consistency coefficients for honesty-relevant behavior, and thus we must be skeptical of any presumed cross-situational trait of honesty. Instead, honesty is more of a function of the agent's situations. Yet, situationists like Doris and Harman want to extend such low coefficients to support the conclusion that the traits don’t exist at all. Is this a tenable stance? Possibly, but it is never fully articulated. As Sreenivasan says, “[n]either [Harman nor Doris] offers to explain how the situationist's data lead to the conclusion that there are no cross-situationally consistent character traits” (2002: 56).

Let us analyze Sreenivasan's fictional example of Homer, representative of a child from Hartshorne and May (1928). Can we draw authoritative conclusions from Homer's observed honest behavior in this experiment to Homer's possession of the trait of 'honesty'? Sreenivasan thinks not: “it follows that Hartshorne and May's data do not warrant attributing cross-situationally consistent honesty to Homer. The conclusion we are looking for [from Doris and Harman], however, is that no data warrant this attribution – that any such attribution would be false. We therefore need some guarantee, in effect, that Hartshorne and May's data are the only data that matter.” This brings up another concern about how trait-relevant behavior is measured; in other words, we would need to be sure that Hartshorne and May's behavioral measures “properly operationalize the character trait [of] honesty.”

42 This experiment, considered to be one of the grandfathers of modern situationist interpretations of human behavior, concluded that honesty in schoolchildren is something like a function of context. That is, children may reliably be honest, e.g., in the classroom but not at home. Or, vice versa. At any rate, Hartshorne and May (1928) is notable for calling into doubt the idea that 'honesty' is a monumental trait which pervades most or all life situations.

43 In this context, to operationalize a character trait would be to define, clearly, (i) what the trait is, (ii)
that any observations of Homer, along different measures, that may result in higher coefficients of consistent behavior, are incorrect. But we receive no such certainty from the situationists. Consequently, other methods of measuring behavior against character traits may give sufficient warrant to attribute honesty to Homer (*Ibid.*). This is not only the case for the 1928 study, but also for many of the collected situationist experiments in later decades.

Relatedly, Sreenivasan cautions that operationalizing character traits, such as honesty, is a tricky business. Specifications of what counts as honesty-relevant behavior as well as honesty-eliciting conditions must be identified, and this contains a three-fold area of difficulty in itself. First, “there is the issue of *whose* specification is to count [e.g. the subject's, or the experimenter's].” Depending on the subject's construal of the situation, certain behaviors that he undertakes may well be seen as consistent with (e.g.) honest behavior. Pretend that Homer “believes in ‘finders keepers’” when it comes to items on the ground. In that case, taking stray change will not count as stealing for Homer. It seems fully in line with any other honest behaviors. Yet, Hartshorne and May considered the honest behavior to be leaving the change. Thus, Homer did not, to the experimenters, display honesty when he picked up the coins.

Second, delineating the relevant measures of behavior – relevant to our sample trait of honesty - can run into difficulties as well. Sreenivasan again offers the example of taking loose change on the ground. “If I do not believe in ‘finders keepers,’” he says, “I

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what situations or contexts normally should (and do) elicit or activate the trait, (iii) which behaviors or actions are representative of illustrative of the trait, and (v) how such observations can be measured or quantified in order to count as evidence for the presence of the trait.
may well accept that pocketing stray change is, strictly, stealing it. Nevertheless, it hardly seems a central or paradigmatic case of theft.” The broader point is that experiments may be using objective measures which are not the most telling when it comes to the trait in question; the design of the experiment may evince some flaws when it comes to what behaviors are seen as crucially trait-relevant.

And, third, Sreenivasan points out the difficulty with what he calls 'normative sensitivity': paradigmatic cases of honesty (or dishonesty) may be present, yet without understanding the “significance of the reason for action [in the subject's mind]” the experiment can fail to reveal why Homer did what he did. It may measure a trait-relevant behavior, but this may not reveal the full explanation of the episode. Behavioral responses “are not meant to be responses simply to the situation as such. Rather, they are meant to be responses to some reason for action present within the situation.” An example is found in the 1928 experiment when it comes to lying. A paradigm case of lying is identified as “‘knowingly communicating a falsehood with the deliberate intention to mislead.’” Yet, the situation used to examine lying behavior is one “in which the intention to mislead serves to achieve a genuine good, namely, preventing another child from getting into trouble. The question therefore arises whether this good suffices to justify the communication of the falsehood.” That is, such a case may not be “a paradigm case of lying after all.” [All from Sreenivasan 2002: 58-60.]

The main point to take away from Sreenivasan is that an experiment faces three important challenges when it sets out to measure behavior as evidence for or against character traits. Thus,
the design and methods of individual experiments must be carefully assessed to make
sure that they are seeking (and measuring) the requisite kinds of behavior. Finally, any
conclusions about the nonexistence of character traits must be carefully argued for
based on such observations. The situationist arguments of Doris and Harman fail in this
last regard, and the authors do not evaluate the suitability of their experiments either.
Instead, they take the body of data en masse to make an inductive argument against
character traits. **However, perhaps all that can be reasonably posited from the data is a
skeptical worry about existence, and not a bold claim about nonexistence.**

Let us consider, now, the problem of trait-contrary behavior. This is, after all, one
of the most shocking points that the situationists make. People can often act in ways
which are incongruous and manifestly evaluatively opposed, even when insignificant
situational variables are changed ever-so-slightly. That is, their outward behavior clashes
with their professed values and repeated past behaviors. Isn't this the force of the
situationist mass of experimental results? Doesn't this, as a body of evidence, show
enough trait-contrariness to argue against robust traits (especially virtues)?

This is a good reply, but it is ultimately answerable by an appeal to context and
the limits of observation. Regarding trait-contrary behavior and its impact on trait
existence, Sreenivasan (2002: 60) remarks that “[i]t does not follow that a failure to help
someone in distress always contra-indicates compassion, or always indicates
inconsistency in an otherwise compassionate person. It does not follow [... because] the
reason to help someone in distress can be defeated [e.g. by being in a hurry]”.}

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To draw this out, let us recall the experiments (cf. Ch. 2) in which theology students typically failed to help a person feigning injury if they were made to feel rushed for a presentation. What is being tested for here is a compassionate response, which is an imperfect duty for us. That is to say, we ought to be compassionate to others, but such a duty is consistent with at least some performances of non-compassionate actions. Yet, the situationists understand the massive failure to act compassionately as evidence that most or all the subjects lacked compassion. **But, isolated observances of non-compassionate action do not count as sufficient evidence to believe that the trait does not exist. As the phrase goes, 'absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.'**

A discussion of the notion of *defeating reasons* is crucial to this point. Defeaters, I argue, can fall either into the category of 'morally neutral' or 'morally significant.' In the case of the hurrying non-helper, we see a reason to perform the imperfect duty of helping defeated by what could be understood as a morally neutral reason (feeling rushed). Yet, that neutral reason may just turn out to be a significant one. This sheds light on a different interpretation of this key situationist experiment. Three classes of example will help to illustrate this idea.

(i) Some people – let us call them 'punctuality fetishists' – will be a slave to the clock without any concern for the requirements of morality. Should a punctuality fetishist be made to feel rushed, there will be no defeaters present because they will not recognize any demands of compassion. So, the *only* reason for action that they discern will be that of wanting to be on time. Yet, such a blind adherence to one's schedule
comes off as terribly crude and callous, especially against a clear case of an opportunity to engage in relatively low-cost helping behavior.

(ii) Average people, who value being on time (yet who can also appreciate a case where helping is possible) will encounter a tension. On the one hand, they recognize a reason to step over the injured party (punctuality), but they also see a reason to stop and help (compassion). It happens that the reason to ignore the person defeats, or trumps, the reason to be compassionate. This is an example of a morally neutral defeater. The reason of feeling rushed, by itself, is not considered to be a morally significant idea. Perhaps this is why the experiment elicits such disapprobation from ethicists in general; it is an example of mistaken priorities that serves as a warning about the bulk of humanity (at least for the situationist).

(iii) Finally, virtuous individuals – or those with a more fully-developed sense of compassion – may discern the opportunity to help as the reason for action. [Some people did stop and help despite feeling rushed.] This is a morally significant reason, and one which trumps a reason to arrive on time for a presentation. Yet, the striking thing about the virtuous person is that they will also discern the moral significance of punctuality itself. It isn't just a matter of fear of embarrassment, or anxiety, but an understanding that an appointment is a kind of promise.44 And, promises ought to be taken seriously as a matter of good conduct. So, here we can see a morally significant

44 It may be argued that this case may not be a strict analogue to the seminary experiment case, because those experimental appointments were pre-determined (i.e. assigned). However, I claim that a virtuous person would not see a given appointment differently than a voluntary one; that is, each would hold the same kind of moral significance as an obligation to be taken seriously.
defeater at work (compassion) defeating a morally significant reason (keeping a promise
*qua* being on time). Conversely, some in the study may have recognized the moral
dimensions of each reason, but acted in favor of promise-keeping rather than helping.
Perhaps this is because helping is, again, an imperfect duty. Further, there could have
been other considerations that were taken into account, such as the presence of other
people who might render aid.

The upshot of these three examples should be clear: due to potential
counterexamples, it is incorrect to argue (as many situationists do) that observed trait-
contrary behavior is evidence against the trait's existence. In our second and third cases,
we see quite clearly how a trait of compassion may exist, yet be occasionally overridden
by other concerns of the moment. Yes, in some cases, a subject's behavior may contra-
indicate compassion (cf. the punctuality fetishist). But in others, it could indicate another
praiseworthy trait such as honesty or a kind of justice that has been activated to the
unique perception of the situation by the agent. It doesn't mean that compassion is
suddenly gone, just that the agent's judgment has put it on the back burner, so to speak.
However, Doris (for one) holds that a trait, as he defines it, cannot operate in such a way.
Harman, insofar as he seems to piggyback on Doris' work, can be said to believe the
same. That is, it is impossible for robust traits not to be activated when there is an
eliciting condition: a chance to be honest produces honesty, if one has it. A chance to be
generous produces generosity, if one has it. **But, it seems that the situationists are just
wrong about how robust traits may work.** The possibility of these kinds of cases speaks
to Sreenivasan's point above. But, we can delve even deeper into the supposed tension between behavior and trait existence that characterizes the situationist challenge.

Let us examine another case with a morally significant defeater. In this case, though, there are two strong moral reasons that each demand consideration. So, imagine that you and some friends are walking in a Bronx neighborhood that is, by all outward appearances, rather poorly off. There are several panhandlers, street musicians, and beggars all around you, and you begin to take in the plight of the residents. What a shame, you all think, as you consider what (if anything) you can do to help these people. Then, as you happen to turn the corner, you come upon a sorry-looking man sitting on the sidewalk. There are cheap liquor bottles all around him, and his incomprehensible speech is slurred and strained. But, he quite eagerly indicates a small cup in front of him with a few coins and a dirty, crumpled dollar bill inside. Your friends put their change in the cup and move on, trying to avoid eye contact with the man on the ground, but you walk past without donating anything at all. Your friends then look at you, incredulously, as you keep moving without any appearance of guilt or shame.

This sounds, perhaps, like the recap of a situationist experiment; you failed to show generosity, so you must not have generosity. Yet, such a conclusion is too hasty. Perhaps you displayed something else here. Perhaps your action took a kind of courage, insofar as you did something you identified as right in defiance of peer pressure to follow a social norm. You displayed social courage by not contributing to the man's

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45 Pun intended.
46 This makes it unlike the previous case, wherein 'punctuality' could be read as morally neutral or morally significant.
alcoholism and disorientation. The material clues around him indicated strongly that the
donation cup is used for wining, not dining. Thus, your actions contra-indicated
generosity, but they simultaneously (albeit more discretely) betrayed courage. Your
reason to give was defeated, rather nobly, by a greater concern for the man's well-being.
Put another way, your reason to act according to an imperfect duty of generosity was
defeated by a reason to act according to an imperfect duty of helping others improve
themselves.

    Finally, there can be cases wherein a reason to perform one perfect duty is
defeated by a reason to perform another perfect duty. When we consider justice, for
example, the following case could present itself. Imagine that you are a teacher whose
policy on makeup exams is, well, nonexistent. You do not allow students to make up an
exam under any circumstances except with a certified excuse from the undergraduate
dean's office. This policy is fair, insofar as you enforce it uniformly. Justice does call for
consistency in rule-following. However, one of your students comes to office hours to
beg for a chance to make up a recent exam due to her situation at home. Her father, she
tells you, abuses both her and her mother. She tells you of police visits, court dates,
bruses hidden, and violent threats. Yet, she does not have a note from the dean, since
any revelation may require the college to involve the authorities. As she rolls up her
sleeve to prove her point, she again asks you to be allowed a makeup exam. Is it just to
refuse her in the interests of your uniform policy?

    I argue that it is not. Doing this would be only apparent justice. It would be
consistent with your policy, but would end up being (to invoke J.J.C. Smart) an example of 'superstitious' rule-worship. I argue that the actually just thing to do would be to allow the exception to your policy given the circumstances; by allowing this student to make up coursework, you are acting according to the demands of fairness and allowing her to get to a level playing field with the students who aren't facing such setbacks. To talk in terms of defeaters, then, we see this: there is a reason to follow the rules, no matter what (justice as uniformity) but this is defeated by a reason to lend a helping hand to those facing obstacles they cannot control (justice as fairness). Justice is a perfect duty, and two of its aspects are in tension here. Each presents a morally significant reason to act, but providing real justice (i.e. fairness) is the right action here.

What is the point of these cases? Quite succinctly, it is to show that one or a few actions which apparently contra-indicate a trait may not, in reality, argue against the trait’s existence. In fact, it seems like AVE isn’t talking about the same thing that Harman and Doris are when the word ‘trait’ is brought up. That is, the situationist experiments rely on a behavioral understanding of a trait: if the chance to do F arises, you will do F if you have that trait. If you do not do F, then you can be said to lack that trait. Yet, AVE is not committed to this understanding of a trait; it is more like the hexeis identified in Chapter One. And, as these examples show, AVE believes it is possible for a virtue to exist and yet not be manifested in some (or even many) situations. The situationist’s account of a robust trait is thus irrelevant to what AVE actually considers important about character!47

47 Thanks to Rachel Cohon for guiding this discussion and suggesting that this be made more explicit.
All of this caution about representativeness and interpretation leads me to the next key work which I will use to argue against Harman's position. In a fairly recent paper, Steve Clarke's (2006: 364) overall thesis is that “[i]t is a mistake to treat the FAE as a result of social psychology demonstrated by experimental evidence. Instead it is one possible interpretation of experimental evidence” (emphasis mine). Further, “[i]f there is more than one viable interpretation of the evidence at hand, then we cannot construe any one interpretation as an established result” (Ibid.). These set up the background for the remaining criticisms in this section against Gilbert Harman.

(2) Clarke argues that situationists who want to argue against traits typically use faulty reasoning when they seek to analyze a certain group of persons and extrapolate the results to a much broader sample. As Harman offers examples from science to present his case, so does Clarke when he discusses what the situationists do here. Let's say I have two balloons, A and B. Balloon A is filled with a minute quantity of lead, but is otherwise mostly helium. Balloon B, though, is mainly filled with lead though there is some helium there, too. What happens when I drop them out of a window? Most obviously, A will rise and B will sink to the ground. But what happens if we just test balloon A on its own and try to extrapolate to balloon B without serious examination (since they are both balloons, after all)? If I were to do this, then I would be using faulty reasoning in trying to observe just one object and extrapolating those results to the other. As Clarke says, “[...] it appears that we are entitled to infer directly from the results of an experiment conducted on one of these objects to conclusions about the
behavior of the other [... but...] plainly, this line of reasoning can lead to grievous error” (2006: 362). If we assumed that since A floated, B would also float, we would be in for quite a surprise if we were eventually to directly test balloon B through the same window-drop method.

Why? Because “members of groupings of analogous causal processes may interact with one another in ways that can produce highly disanalogous results” (Ibid.). Hence, dropping each object out of a window (a completely analogous causal process!) will result in different results depending on the properties of the object. In the balloon example, the stuff that each balloon had inside of it mattered for the experimental result. It isn't enough to assume that each balloon is like most other balloons, i.e. that it possessed the property of 'floats-when-dropped'.

The parallel here should be quite clear: when situationists examine a random sampling of people, the results can be suggestive but are never wholly conclusive. Not everyone failed to be a good samaritan, and even the Milgram experiment had its dissenters and refuseniks. So, even when all subjects were exposed to analogous causal processes (read: certain experimental situations), there were disanalogous results based (presumably) on some interior feature or property of the subject. Thus, even though there may be similar methods or circumstances, we are in error to overlook the potential differences within each subject that could lead to their non-uniform behavior.

Clarke also argues that it is wrong to carry over the behavior of a group of subjects from the lab (broadly construed) to their everyday lives. He says that “[e]ven
though people are found to make inferential mistakes in social psychology experiments, it seems possible that these mistakes do not carry over to all or even many non-experimental circumstances” (361). Clarke (Ibid., citing Gilbert and Malone (1995)) mentions that “such [situationist-type] experiments are among the poorest vehicles for obtaining actuarial information about attributions. Because no effort is made to select representative situations or subjects, [they] cannot reveal the kinds of attributions people usually, normally, routinely, generally, or typically make.” This is troubling, since the experiments that situationists have relied on are ones “in which the power of situational factors is unusually high” since “[s]ocial psychologists go out of their way to select […] circumstances in which subjects are likely to underestimate the power of situational factors” (Ibid.). These carefully drawn experimental situations are, on the whole, more situationally powerful than we may find outside the testing room (Ibid.).

So, perhaps we must accept some amount of discord between the 'real' world and the 'lab' world. But, when we are interpreting human behavior (with an operational hypothesis about the pressures of situations), then we must be cautious about extrapolating our conclusions to the general public and their usual, normal, routine, general, and typical situations. Without prolonged observations of this kind, the situationists are not, I argue, entitled to speculate about the traits of anyone outside

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48 The import of this comment is just that situationist experiments may mirror, in some regards, the way that people actually encounter situations and reason through them in real life. However, the experiments are typically designed to test for one certain behavior or response, and thus every feature is carefully selected for and crafted to yield the most efficient test for that behavior or response. Thus, any resemblance to a 'typical day' is probably quite rare, since the experiment exerts targeted and premeditated pressures on subjects.
of conditions which closely approximate the conditions of their experiments.⁴⁹

Experiments measure behaviors only, and often overlook how subjects interpret a situation via their own system of values, and how they imbue significance and meaning into a certain scenario. This is key information to understanding how behavior works, though, and explanations of behavior seem incomplete without it. Clarke (2006: 363) puts it bluntly:

> It is legitimate to extrapolate from experimental circumstances to circumstances that closely resemble the experimental circumstances. However, unless we understand how relevant causal processes operate and interact, we should not attempt to generalise from experimental results to circumstances beyond the scope of this circumscribed range. Our knowledge of the causal processes that underpin person perception is slight at best, so we should not attempt to extrapolate from the results of experiments in person perception to circumstances that do not closely resemble experimental circumstances.

(3) My penultimate argument against Harman, following Clarke, is that the FAE is just an “ephemeral” phenomenon. Clarke cites an experiment by Burger (1991) which shows that the initial effects of the FAE dissipate over time and given other opportunities to observe and judge behavior. So, while many of us fall into the trap of the FAE, it is only an initial mistake that is not uncorrectable. In fact, Clarke argues, many of us do correct such mistakes. We can amend our trait attributions, if need be, when confronted with trait-discrepant behavior. I may attribute the trait of courage to a police officer who risks his own life to save a bystander, though this is my first observation of

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⁴⁹ The terms 'lab', 'experiment', and 'testing room' are used here metaphorically; that is, I use them to indicate situations in which certain important variables are introduced to promote a certain expected behavior (see above, note 4).
such behavior. In order to be justified in my attribution, I would have to observe his behavior over many different situations as well as obtain some notion of his track record in the past. If I cared to do this, I could effectively reverse the FAE and come up with a reasoned, informed attribution based on proper evidence. Perhaps the policeman only is brave in cases where there is a news crew nearby, or if someone else in the police force is with him. If he fails to act bravely in other situations that clearly call for it, then I will rescind my attribution because it is mistaken. He was *prima facie* courageous, but it turns out that he just puts on a show of courage when others are watching; in fact, he is not courageous at all. If that is the case, and we are not beholden to our initial errors in trait attribution, why should we think that the FAE is really such a pervasive and permanent mistake regarding how we assign traits? Why not just see it for what it really is: our tendency to make hasty judgments, but judgments *which are not unalterable* given time, and which are not the final word when it comes to assessing personality (cf. Clarke 2006: 358-9)? If the FAE is so easily (and often) remedied, then we ought not to consider it an overall credible threat to characterological assessments and attributions.  

(4) Finally, Clarke argues that the FAE is now thought of as a “molecular” error in

50 An interesting point is made by Perry Hinton (1993) who, in *The Psychology of Interpersonal Perception*, mentions that there is a difference between errors and mistakes. An error is a “deviation from an expected position” while a mistake is “when a real-world situation is judged incorrectly” (133-34). He notes that “in social judgment the massive amount of work on errors should not necessarily be taken as evidence for human inaccuracy […] In the laboratory] we may observe a whole range of biases from our normative model of correct performance. However […] they may not be errors at all if they serve a practical function,” i.e. if the processes behind such judgments serve useful adaptive or learning functions in the real world (134). Perhaps when we examine the FAE as an error in ‘the lab,’ we only see one part of a larger picture; it also may be an example of a heuristic process which, often, helps us navigate the world. It is not infallible, but it may be a pretty good indicator of, e.g., the amount of trust we should assign to persons we encounter. [I do not follow the distinction between mistakes and errors in this dissertation; all other usages should be seen as synonymous. I only reproduce this one insofar as it establishes the more general point about the FAE and its role in human life.]
reasoning made up of smaller, “atomic” errors. It is no longer a monolithic mistake in
trait attribution, but a collection of mini-mistakes. Citing Gilbert (1998), Clarke identifies
four key atomic errors: idealism (seeing what you expect to see), egotism (seeing what
you want to see), realism (assuming your observations correspond to reality), and
circumstantialism (focusing on only what you see). One upshot of this explanation is that
people are not necessarily going to make the same kind of attribution mistakes in all (or
maybe even most) cases. The FAE is not guaranteed to be committed uniformly, because
the combinations of atoms precludes such rigid expectations. Also, Clarke explains that
“...for each of the four atoms of the FAE, there will also be circumstances in which that
error can lead us to overemphasise the importance of situational causes and
underestimate the importance of dispositional causes.” This means that the FAE cuts
both ways, and not unilaterally as Harman argues. **While we may initially and
mistakenly attribute a certain trait to a person (and overlooking the situation), we also
may end up overemphasizing the power or role of the situation, and not focusing
sufficiently on the person.** For example, Clarke considers the error of egotism by
contrasting a dentist who prefers a situational explanation to one who prefers a personal
one, and the resulting usefulness of their predictions based on those explanations:

A dentist who explains her patient’s nervous behavior by appealing to the fact
that people waiting for the dentist are in a nerve-wracking situation, will be
able to accurately predict the nervous behaviour of many future patients. The
dentist who reaches the conclusion that mysteriously, her practice has
attracted people of an exceptionally nervous disposition is left with an
unexplained generalisation and no good reason to project that generalisation
to future cases. So, in this case, the dentist will be **egotistically** inclined to
prefer a situational to a dispositional explanation (361, emphasis mine).
Such a molecular reading argues directly against what Harman understands the FAE to do: atomizing the FAE shows that “the extent to which [it] is generalisable is thrown into further doubt” because of the myriad ways in which the individual atoms will combine. We may see many different kinds (and degrees) of bias when it comes to trait attribution, since the FAE is not always made uniformly by all people (2006: 360-61). In the dentist case, for example, we see that egotism cuts both ways.

So, where do these four points leave us? I argue that, taken together, they amount to (i) a substantial refutation of both Harman's interpretation of the FAE as well as (ii) a charge of making an unwarranted assumption about the epistemological status of the 'conclusions' of social psychology. If I am right, then Harman's brand of situationism (as well as his recommendation that we can, and should, abandon all notions of character traits) seems to fall short in several major areas; therefore, in consideration of the evidence, we ought to reject Harman's FAE-based argument against character traits. The FAE is neither as serious, nor as pervasive, as may once have been believed. Thus, it is not a sufficient basis to deny the existence of robust traits, and consequently Harman's argument does little damage to the AVE position.

II. Lack of Character, Critiqued

A few of the more general, methodological points that I raised against Harman are also charges against Doris. The point about fallibilism, as well as points (1), (2), and (3) above, apply equally well to Doris' refutation of globalism in *Lack of Character*, since
Doris also upholds the power of the FAE in human psychology. However, there are some more specific criticisms that pertain to that work, which I examine in the remainder of this section.

Since Doris uses his interpretation of situationist data to argue against AVE specifically (as it depends on the existence of robust, cross-situational, 'global' character traits), it is necessary for him to have a correct picture of what Aristotle is putting forward about virtue in the *Ethics*. If Doris is using a misconstrued or inaccurate reading of Aristotle here, then there is little reason to think that his attack has any force against a truly Aristotelian viewpoint. Perhaps not surprisingly, my first charge is that Doris is using a conceptually inaccurate understanding of AVE in his book.

(1) Doris' reading of Aristotle is mistaken. This is a criticism best voiced by Julia Annas in a recent article (2002: 639), where she indicates that “the book [i.e. *Lack of Character*] contains no arguments against virtue ethics in the actual Aristotelian tradition; it sets up as opponent only a radically unintellectual version of virtue” (emphasis mine). She elaborates upon this by stating that “Doris takes the view he attacks to be that character, where the virtues are concerned, is something fixed, developed independently of activity. He sets this view up by selective quotation from Aristotle [... wherein] virtue is pictured as an uncritical and rigid habit, which leads to crass overconfidence in our overall ability to work out what is salient in particular situations” (*Ibid.*: 637).

As should be clear from my discussion of virtue (especially its components of
prohairesis and phronesis) in the first chapter, Aristotle sees virtue as anything *but* 'uncritical and rigid habit.' Rather, it is the ability to consistently do just what is called for in just the right way. This sensitivity to situational variables is crucial to the agent's correct deliberation and decision. And, further, such a sensitivity will allow a virtuous person, on Aristotle's account, to discriminate between possible defeaters in a situation. So, in certain contexts wherein the *phronimos* must choose between acting generously or bravely (cf. my beggar example, in the previous section) he may fail to display generosity because such a response was defeated by his sensitivity to the fact that he ought to display a kind of bravery *rather than* generosity. Such subtlety is not the product of unthinking habit, which is what the situationist understanding of 'cross-situational consistency' seems to imply.

For Aristotle, such virtuous discrimination is correct because it is representative of a fine attunement to the moral requirements of the situation: an agent's failure to act generously does not by itself nullify or contra-indicate the presence of a robust trait of generosity. Indeed, were generosity called for here, a virtuous agent would have acted accordingly. Instead, another moral requirement was discerned that trumped the call for generosity. Annas reinforces Aristotle's view when she states that “[t]he more you develop a virtue, the less important to you is mere habit, and the more complex and flexible your ability to reason about new and innovative kinds of situation you may be faced with. [...]Virtue] is not just consistent with, but requires, constant openness and sensitivity to situations of exactly the sort Doris ascribes to the situationist” (2002: 637-
Doris (2005: 663) acknowledges the point from Annas, but reminds us that he does not commit himself to an unintelligent view of virtue, insofar as he writes (2002: 16-17) that virtues are “intelligent dispositions, characterized by distinctive patterns of emotional response, deliberation, and decision as well as by more overt behavior,” and to say that X has a virtue is not to say that X “can be counted on to reliably do the same thing but to say that they can be counted on to reliably do whatever is appropriate to that virtue.” Insofar as he does state this, I judge that Doris may not end up providing a wholly mechanistic view of virtue. However, when he uses the phrase ‘appropriate to that virtue’, this may be where he gets himself into a stickier situation, since he does not qualify this point. A generous person obviously does what generosity requires when it is needed, but this must be in the absence of any countervailing demands posed by another virtue. That is, Doris does not explicitly allow, as far as I can tell, for what happens when virtues may appear to conflict. What happens when I forsake generosity in a situation which plausibly demands it, but I end up acting courageously instead (as with the beggar)? Doris, e.g., may take such a non-display of generosity as evidence against the existence of such a trait. Generosity was called for, one could argue, and I failed to display behavior appropriate to that virtue. Yet, I did not do anything vicious by my trait-contrary behavior. Indeed, I did what was virtuous just because I supplanted generosity with a kind of courage. And, courage was not obviously even called for in this situation; it is something that the virtuous person discerns from sifting through all the
Gopal Sreenivasan (2008: 608-9) makes an excellent point about the situationist reliance on a 'tension' between trait possession and contrary behavior when he says that “[one cannot] responsibly fall back on the thought that a subject's one time violation of the requirements of [e.g.] compassion, while strictly consistent with possession of the virtue, is nevertheless best explained by the subject's lacking the virtue.\textsuperscript{51} Ironically, reliance on this thought involves a close cousin of the fundamental attribution error.”\textsuperscript{52}

The singular non-occurrence of trait-relevant behavior cannot plausibly deny the existence of that trait; this is, indeed, a very irresponsible position to take, and it seems that Doris and other situationists assume just such a stance when it comes to their embracing much of the situationist experimental data.

The upshot of this whole discussion should be quite clear: Doris seeks to make cross-situational consistency a requirement of globalism about traits, which he argues AVE is committed to. But, if AVE does not accept or require his idiosyncratic understanding of that consistency, then all of the situationist argument he musters against AVE is obviated due to this misunderstanding. Aristotelians can embrace a good deal of situationist experimental evidence and yet consistently deny Doris' arguments on theoretical and conceptual grounds. Many situationist arguments conclude that people will act differently in different situations, even if very minor aspects of the situation are

\textsuperscript{51} Sreenivasan (2008: 609) also discusses that we may have blindspots which preclude totally consistent action, but nevertheless do not count against the possession of a virtue. This is in addition to the defeater scenarios that I discuss above.

\textsuperscript{52} This follows Sreenivasan (2008)'s footnote 10, where he says that “[t]he strict parallel here to the fundamental attribution error would be the inference that most of Milgram's subjects had a disposition to violate the requirements of compassion (609).
the only thing that makes them different. But, AVE can agree here. For instance, if a virtuous agent was placed in nine similar situations ($S_1-S_9$) with our beggar, and then a new situation ($S_{10}$), I would expect some kind of difference in the actions between $S_1-S_9$ and $S_{10}$. This would, again, be due to the sensitivity of the agent's understanding and judgment; all things being equal, doing the same thing in $S_{10}$ seems unreflective, and maybe even boorish, if the difference in the situations is some kind of morally significant difference.

And, on a final note, there are competing theories of consistency which argue against Doris' view. For instance, Nancy Snow (2010: 23) argues that consistent behavior is not a function of objective features of situations, but rather of similar meanings in situations as perceived by the agent. That is, the fact that an agent failed to act consistently kindly across several similar situations which were expected to elicit kindness should not necessarily surprise us. It should not surprise us, that is, if we learn that the agent failed to intuit the same subjective meanings and motivations in each situation. The objective situations may be incredibly similar, yet if there is something which makes certain of them seem disparate to the agent, then behavior will change accordingly. On Snow's account, consistent behavior is not measured by observed outward performances, but rather would have to be assessed by seeing how outward behaviors reflect the values and motivations of a certain agent. Just acting well, or poorly, does not quite reveal the entire picture. Inner states must also be put under scrutiny. Yet, Doris maintains that objective consistency is the one which is more
important for moral psychology, even though such a position ignores something which figures profoundly in our moral behavior (i.e. how we see things). Snow (2010) explains this reply, proclaiming that “[t]he point is that objective differences in circumstances have subjective meanings for people, and these meanings influence behavior” (27). If that’s right, as I think it is, then Doris is mistaken to write off the subject's-eye-view of the situation as the locus of behavior.

Now, perhaps with more difficulty, I must answer Doris' claim that people often exhibit some inconsistent, contradictory behaviors (hence his argument for local traits) as well the assertion that behavior owes more to situational differences than any individualized dispositional differences among persons. The first and most obvious response here is to invoke Aristotle's dictum that full virtue is quite rare. I touched upon this in the beginning of the chapter, and dismissed it as something of a broad and naïve response to virtue ethics' critics, at least when phrased in such a crude way. But, through a more sophisticated lens, a variant of the rara avis strategy may turn out to be an insightful way to answer the situationist. For example, while people may act in accordance with virtue at times, they more often fail to act rightly (or they fail to act with the right motivation) in varying degrees. This is a point taken up by Neera Badhwar (2009: 257) when she remarks that “[t]he Milgram and other situationist experiments support the real-life evidence that most of us are highly akratic and heteronomous.”

In Of course, I disagree with Badhwar's argument in toto that there are no global traits because there cannot be, given our finitude as a constraint on knowledge and behavior. But, her point about situationism here is worth reviewing insofar as it helps to substantiate Aristotle's opinion of the hoi polloi. And, though I am arguing from a perspective of assumed robust traits, I do find something worth examining in her discussion of the 'domain-specificity' of virtue. In particular, I see this as compatible with my emphasis on knowledge of one's social embeddedness (vide infra, my Section IV).
fact, most of us are probably continent at best, meaning that we manage to hesitantly, reluctantly, and perhaps grudgingly do the right thing. But, this only shows that full virtue is difficult to attain and requires constant vigilance on the part of the agent. The attainment of virtue is the outcome of a long learning process which, as many of us all too readily understand, involves moral failures as a spur to moral growth. To observe a one-time moral failure, even across many different samples and populations, does not disprove robust traits. Instead, it demonstrates compatibility with Aristotle's view on moral education and character establishment. It's not just that virtue is a rare thing, it's that we are all in different stages of development. Robust traits are not like a light switch; they do not simply turn 'on' after ten or fifteen years of life. They must be nourished and guided and reinforced through teaching and experience. According to AVE, the observation that a lot of people failed to display kindness, e.g., when they were made to feel rushed suggests that most people do not understand what kindness entails. Importantly, it points to a kind of cognitive and/or practical ignorance on the part of the agent rather than proof against the existence of robust kindness.

It is important to note how this is different than blithely asserting that virtue is uncommon, and using just that assertion to wave away a challenge to virtue ethics. Rather, it is an insight into the way by which that rare kind of virtue can be reached, and one which appreciates (and doesn't discard) situationist revelations about often-confusing human behavior. Indeed, I am arguing in this chapter that the situationists fail, ultimately, because of their inability to make a convincing enough case, and not just
because they are mounting a hunt against elusive quarry. Doris is wrong because his

evidence doesn’t support his conclusion. It just so happens that, as a boon to AVE, an
Aristotelian theory of virtue can accommodate much situationist argumentation.

[Although, I find it important to suggest here that the quarry may not be quite as elusive
as the situationists proclaim. Kristjansson (2008: 72) remarks that “[i]f up to 20-30% of
people possess robust traits – witness some of the staple psychological experiments –
that is already a considerable subset of the population. Doris may be thinking [in his
book] of heroic virtue rather than ordinary full virtue”. If this is the case, and some
conflation is taking place, then we ought not to be surprised that people fail to exhibit
‘virtues’ in the heroic sense!]

Let me hearken back, though, to my earlier point about an agent’s understanding
what the virtues mean. Julia Annas (2002) uses an example about her hypothetical
colleague Mary, who is warm and respectful at work but horrifically rude in other
contexts such as restaurants and cafes. She suggests that despite outward appearances,
Mary is not respectful at all. This is because she lacks the understanding of what
respectfulness is, and what kinds of attitudes and behaviors go along with
respectfulness. “Respect [...] is not a trait which switches on and off in situations where
the opinions of the people concerned can be ignored [...] What we find is that she was
not respectful to her colleagues at all; the rudeness to waiters shows that her behaviour
to her colleagues expressed not respect, but hypocrisy or deference. [Mary] does not,
we say, understand what respect really is; for if she did, she would make her behaviour
in these different areas consistent” (640, emphasis mine).\footnote{Ironically, Mary’s behavior here points out a lack of the global trait of respectfulness, but possession of the global trait of hypocrisy!!!}

Kristjansson (2008: 67) reminds us that “Doris latches onto the point made by Aristotle that virtuous persons will never behave basely”, but that a study by Howard Curzer “brings to light that this point is an idealisation which Aristotle modifies in various ways. If he did not, we would be unable to explain [...] virtue comes in degrees; that full virtue is still inferior to god-like heroic virtue; and that virtuous people sometimes act wrongly, while remaining virtuous.”\footnote{On Kristjansson’s summary (2008: 67), Curzer finds “at least seven distinct ways in which fully virtuous persons can, by Aristotle’s lights, act out of character without being displaced from their superior level.”} According to Kristjansson, Curzer’s reading proves that “not only are most people insufficiently virtuous, even the fully virtuous can have tiny glitches in their characters” (\textit{Ibid.}). Again, this all shows that trait-contrary behavior does not disprove Aristotelian understandings of robust traits. Further, Doris misunderstands what is required by virtue and the possession of a virtuous trait. And, this point especially may bear on the other big half of the situationist challenge in the guise of dimes and lawnmowers. Doris argues in \textit{Lack of Character} that a big concern for AVE is the propensity for things like loud lawnmowers or finding dimes in payphones can have a dramatic impact on our ethical behavior. The first point to acknowledge is that \textit{any} ethical theory would have to deal with such psychological phenomena, so there is nothing inherently damning to AVE when Doris brings this evidence to light. \textbf{But, if AVE is the kind of theory which accepts the fact that even the best of us can have our shortcomings, then the force of the lawnmower-type experiments is dramatically}}
lessened. Perhaps AVE cares less about our tendencies to be thrown off-track like this than the ways which we might identify and mitigate those tendencies. I say a bit more about this in the next chapter, as well as Chapter Five – but, the main point is that there may be ways to become aware of certain psychological pitfalls and cultivate appropriate responses in the face of them. **Moreover, AVE is not theoretically committed to an agent's having totally consistent behavior across situations.** This is especially true regarding situationist which involve conflicts of virtues, and which require a kind of moral adaptivity. It is helpful to view AVE as a developmental theory of virtue, following commentary by Frans Svensson (2008). In brief, this means that the kind of criteria we use to evaluate a novice moral agent are not the same criteria by which we evaluate an experienced moral agent, i.e. a virtuous person. The novice may well be thrown off by lawnmowers and dimes, while the expert will be more adept at dealing with them because they possess more ethical awareness and self-knowledge. Finally, we can ask what the lawnmower-and-dime experiments really show. They reveal much about how unconscious forces can impact actions, but they do not reveal what the agents were thinking, feeling, or perceiving. There is no discussion of the agent's *reasons* for action, just a report of the action in response to an experimental stimulus. Yet, it is strange to think that moral education of sorts could not be of any help. Wouldn't knowledge of human psychological quirks, like the tendency to be more irritable around a crying child, be valuable pieces of information when one is seeking to become more ethically capable? Or, when seeking to teach their children about moral behavior as they grow
up? I argue that the lawnmower-and-dime experiments are treated as immutable facts about human psychology by the situationists, which cannot be mitigated by moral education or attempts at ethical self-improvement. Because of this, the situationists give undue credit to such experiments and impute to them much more power over ethical behavior than they may really have.

What about Doris' proposition that behavioral differences owe more to situational differences than to dispositional ones? I argue that Doris' observation here may be wrong, for the same reasons that Harman was wrong to consider the FAE as a single, monumental error in attribution that is made relatively uniformly. If the FAE is a molecular error in reasoning, and has the potential to cut both ways, then it may be that situationists are typically overemphasizing situational factors to explain behavior and at least sometimes underemphasizing dispositional ones. Moreover, Doris appears to create something of a false dichotomy when he portrays behavior as either the product of a situation, or else the product of a rigidly-defined and almost mechanical trait. In fact, it is argued that differences in behavior mainly arise from the agent's interpretation and assessment of value in a situation, and where he or she finds reasons for action. The atoms of experience combine in myriad ways and elicit wildly divergent interpretations of the same objective set of circumstances. This is a point that is consistent with Snow's (2010) argument, cited previously. Whatever is salient about a situation to us is what reveals our options. The situation itself is not the final word when it comes to human behavior, as situationists like Doris imply it is. Rather, it is just one more factor in the
extremely complex bundle of factors that end in human action.

<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Summary: Major Points Against Situationism</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Assumes the findings of social psychology are entrenched, established, and widely accepted</td>
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<td>2. Harman does not prove that traits do not exist, only that we can be mistaken about attributing them to others</td>
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<td>3. Harman takes the FAE to be a unitary and monumental error in reasoning; in fact, it is molecular and can cut both ways</td>
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<td>4. It is unwarranted to conclusively infer that a lack of experimental evidence for certain traits means that those traits do not exist, especially when the 'traits' being sought are different from what AVE requires</td>
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<td>5. The situationists assume a view of character traits that virtue ethicists do not hold; Doris, e.g., sees traits as more mechanistic and behavioral than contemporary AVE does</td>
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<td>6. It may be inappropriate to extrapolate from experimental data to general or typical behavior. Situationists rely too much on the assumption that people behave similarly inside and outside of the lab, even if the body of evidence is suggestive.</td>
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<td>7. Doris (e.g.) puts too much stock in objective consistency of situations (from an experimental point of view) and not enough in subjective consistency (how an agent interprets situational features).</td>
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<td>8. The lawnmower-and-dime type experiments are not a death sentence to ethical behavior. There may be ways to identify and mitigate such environmental pressures. And, AVE may not necessarily treat these as condemning an agent to hopelessness even if they continue to throw one off course from time to time.</td>
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<td>9. The lawnmower-and-dime experiments do not show that character traits are absent from human psychology. They point out how unconscious forces can influence actions, but they do not discuss the agent's reasons or inner mental or emotional states, which are integral to virtue. And, there is no reason to think that moral education about these forces will fail to help us mitigate them.</td>
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**Table 3.1 – Major Considerations Against Situationism**
III. Lessons from the Situationist Challenge

Kristjan Kristjansson (2008: 76) wryly suggests that “Aristotelian characterology is not at death's door. There is quite a lot of life in the old dog yet.” I think this is accurate, and the rest of this dissertation is motivated by the question of 'Where should AVE go from here?' If we are now allowed to reject the situationist challenge, as I have argued, then we may once more embrace AVE as a viable (read: empirically adequate, explanatorily useful) ethical theory. This position includes the assumption that Aristotelian robust traits (*hexeis*) exist, and play a central role in our lives. We may still advocate for AVE on a theoretical level. Further, that our 'folk psychology' is no longer thrown into severe doubt, and that we are at least sometimes warranted in making attributions of traits (even if we must be cautious about our reasons and justifications for doing so). However, any philosopher worth his salt must recognize whether or not there is some merit to his opponents' position. Though the main situationist challenge to AVE has been defused, it still has implications for how we ought to understand and conceptualize virtue ethics. Situationist data holds some importance for AVE, so ignoring it or brushing it aside would preclude necessary theoretical development. Sreenivasan (2008: 611) remarks that “[o]ne time performance experiments are well suited to illustrating [the failure to appreciate situational variables on behavior], and often serve to drive the necessary corrective home effectively.” What they also are good for is to “serve a more specific *diagnostic* function [by bringing] potential holes in people's character to wider attention” (*Ibid.*).\(^{56}\) This is exactly what has been done; the

\(^{56}\) He also urges that these be followed up with iterated experiments to test for certain kinds of traits, but
situationist challenge, though it fails, prompts AVE to reflect on just what a person's state of virtue might be when they fail to exhibit even low-cost helping behavior. It sheds light on character traits which are not fragmented, as Doris supposes, but perhaps are fragile. Note, though, that I am using the term 'fragile' and not 'broken.' That is, our ability to act virtuously depends on serious willpower and vigilance. Without this, it may be compromised.

What I argue, then, is that AVE must embrace and appreciate the situationist warning. Even if AVE is entitled to its assumptions, we must be sure not to place too much blind faith in the power of our character to keep us out of trouble. What is needed is a reading of AVE in which aspects of situations are given more moral weight and importance. We need an account of moral sensitivity which includes substantial knowledge of how situations can impel us towards certain ways of acting. We also must appreciate that such a sensitivity depends on the thoughts and perceptions of the agent; objective features of a situation can be interpreted by agents in very disparate ways, and the virtuous person will consistently find moral significance in the right aspects of a situation. This may mean that she picks up on more moral features overall, or even that she can see moral significance in places where others cannot. Character traits, too, must be understood as intimately bound up with the idea of an agent's point of view of the world.

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this is not something I discuss in this work. It should be noted, though, that testing for a character trait is a very tricky business, though it would prove immensely profitable if a solid experimental design could be achieved and implemented on this front.
IV. The Road Ahead

The next chapter examines an argument by Maria Merritt (2000), who presents an alternative assessment of situationist evidence and decides to try to salvage virtue by switching from an Aristotelian to a Humean version. This is a creative but ultimately disappointing enterprise which leaves much to be desired by the proponent of AVE, but a treatment of the argument does help to emphasize the role that a *phronesis* of fragility plays in ethical life. It also emphasizes why my reading of *phronesis* (i.e. as *phronesis* after situationism) seems best suited to interpreting the requirements of Aristotelian virtue in the 21st century. Part of this discussion will include the important link between practical wisdom and interior sources of virtue, in stark contrast to Merritt's Humean proposal which seems to lack a requirement for such inner motivation.57 I will also discuss the importance that ethical reflection and meditation play in *phronesis*, which Aristotle's view encompasses58 but Merritt's does not. Chapter Four will consist of a more detailed examination of *phronesis* as a kind of moral perception, sensitivity, or awareness. Related to that will be an analysis of how one can achieve an understanding of his or her social embeddedness (and what specific kinds of benefits this brings to my reading of *phronesis*). Any worthwhile, contemporary account of practical wisdom must show it as dependent on the agent's understanding his own social roles and situations, and how these interact with his beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and values. I call this an understanding of one's own 'social embeddedness.' By this, I understand the

57 This may stem from a misreading of Hume's ethical writings, as suggested by Rachel Cohon, but more will be said in the next chapter about this.
58 cf. my Chapter 1, esp. regarding the discussion of *prohairesis*
complicated network of relationships, roles, and responsibilities that an individual experiences in daily social-cultural life. This also takes into account occupations, familial and other relationships, race, and gender (to name just a few criteria). It also takes into account the attendant roles, responsibilities, and expectations for those facets of social life. In short, then, attaining *phronesis* depends on an agent's knowledge of his or her own social embeddedness. Only this kind of knowledge will give the agent the greatest chance to grasp the kinds of situations he typically confronts, and how he does (and should) confront them.\(^5^9\) Forewarned is forearmed, and thus an agent who understands his own range of situations, obligations, and expectations is more likely to act rightly (especially if he engages in ethical reflection and meditation from time to time). A deliberative faculty of *phronesis* which appreciates the social complexity of our moral lives, and helps us 'adjust our aim' in tough situations, seems like the kind of *phronesis* that is most at home with the empirical spirit of Aristotle's ethical thought.

Then, in the final chapter, I examine the idea of moral imagination as the faculty which helps to guide and shape our deliberations and decisions. This kind of imagination undergirds *phronesis* by supplying it with resources for our all-important ethical reflection: Mark Johnson (1993: 187) identifies our moral imagination's ability to be “insightful, critical, exploratory, and transformative.” I feel that this is a promising area of psychological and philosophical research, and thus I will finish this dissertation by presenting a sketch of moral imagination and its relevance to a *phronesis* of fragility.

\(^5^9\) I say 'greatest chance' here since Aristotle commits himself to saying that the virtuous person will most often act appropriately, but not that he or she will *always* carry the day. So, this caveat helps to avoid this undesirable and unrealistic 'extreme' view of virtue.
Chapter Four

Talent hits a target no one else can hit;
Genius hits a target no one else can see.

- Arthur Schopenhauer

Chapter Summary

This chapter begins by exploring an alternative response to the situationist challenge from Maria Merritt (2000), who suggests that in light of the situationist evidence we ought to abandon AVE's unrealistic psychological emphasis on robust traits. However, I find that her argument falls short in important ways, which only end up increasing AVE's appeal. Part of the fallout is that we see the importance of Aristotelian phronesis or practical wisdom. I go on to discuss phronesis as not just right reasoning, but also as a certain kind of awareness or sensitivity. I demonstrate how full phronesis must draw on social embeddedness to produce virtuous decisions as a function of assessing a plethora of personal and situational variables. And, finally, I tackle an objection from Merritt, Doris, & Harman (of the Moral Psychology Research Group, 2010) which presents a different kind of situationist challenge.

I. An Alternative Response to Situationism: Maria Merritt's HVE

In the last chapter, I argued that the situationist challenge, as put forward by
Doris (2002) and Harman (2003, 1999a, 1999b) falls short as an overall objection to AVE. But, I also argued that some very important ideas about the fragility of our virtues has come to light through situationist experiments, and the defender of virtue seems obligated to incorporate these into a fuller understanding of his or her position.

However, embracing AVE with a renewed spirit is not the only reasonable response one can make to the situationist body of evidence. Indeed, one could simply agree with them and become... well, a situationist of one kind or another. My argument in the last chapter should demonstrate that I believe that this strategy is unappealing as well as unwarranted. But, one could interpret the evidence's bearing on virtue ethics, broadly construed, in a different light. That is, one could embrace a different kind of virtue ethics instead of reviving Aristotle.

Maria Merritt (2000) takes this second approach and argues that situationism has surely proven AVE to be an untenable position. But, it has not ruled out a theory of virtue altogether. Because of that, anyone who would continue to dabble in virtue ethics is encouraged to accept a Humean model of virtue (hereafter HVE, 'Humean virtue ethics) which is more empirically adequate and attainable than AVE. In what follows, I rehearse Merritt's argument, raise some key worries about this approach, and then demonstrate how this analysis helps to reinforce my own approach of AVE driven by a full understanding of the faculty of *phronesis*.

According to Merritt (2000: 366), the situationist critique of robust, global character traits seems to succeed due to two key factors. The first is that “ethically
arbitrary situational factors” such as one’s mood, or one’s being in a hurry, seem to have an enormous impact on one’s ethical behavior: an impact that, were one in possession of an Aristotelian virtue, we would not expect.

This leads to the second, and perhaps most persuasive reason for Merritt to consider the situationist’s argument. According to Merritt, “we are in error to interpret behavioral consistencies in terms of robust traits” (366). Instead, we would do better, as situationist psychology urges us, to interpret consistent behavior in terms of recurring “common situational regularities” (Ibid.) Behavioral regularity occurs because, on the whole, we interact with a fairly small group of “intimates” in fairly repetitive situational contexts (373). Thus, we cannot possess the strong global dispositions or traits that Aristotle envisions. The best we can do is achieve local dispositions which are very contextually-dependent and may vary from situation to situation (cf. Doris 2002, as discussed at the end of my Chapter Two).

Now, Merritt considers the position of the Aristotelian in the face of situationism. What would the defender of AVE be confronted with? One particular outcome that she identifies is a sense of what I term ‘character anomie.’ Merritt urges us to admit that “our own ethical character [is] dependent, in an ongoing way […] upon our involvements in our social life” (375). That is, our character is “socially sustained” (374). This stands opposed to the ‘insulating’ nature of Aristotelian character, in which the virtues, if one has them, ensure that “making good practical choices depends as little as possible on contingent external factors” (375). So, our ethical choices depend quite a bit on our
surroundings, and less so on a strong inner 'character', according to Merritt. If we consider that we no longer are able to erect a bulwark against external temptations and negative influences, or at least that this seems like less of a possibility, we may feel insecure about our own ability to act well and correctly. This feeling of unsettledness, loss, and diminished self-confidence is what I mean to capture by the idea of character anomie. [I, with Merritt, argue that social sustenance of virtue through (e.g.) positive associations with others, and membership in groups which foster and support the virtues is crucially important to being a good person. Yet, my overall contention is that this is only one half of the picture. The other, equally crucial component is to have a strong inner ethical life, as I will argue for later in this section.]

Next, Merritt looks to ideas about virtue in the writings of David Hume, and suggests that adopting HVE instead of trying to repair AVE may help to alleviate our concerns above. She claims that since AVE promotes such a strongly insular notion of character, as well as one which makes virtuous motivations entirely internal, a tension is produced if one accepts the situationist psychological landscape (376). Basically, Merritt says, we would have to always be questioning whether our commitment to virtue were issuing from a “firm and unchangeable” character; however, “such vigilance would tend to be counterproductive” if not “hardly sane” (376-77). By this, Merritt identifies the problem that the Aristotelian would run into when he or she is given over to perpetual watchfulness and introspection about the sources of a given action.

Merritt concludes that constant reflection on this sort of dependence issue –
while in one respect noble – would also tend to overshadow the actual ethical considerations in one’s life and divert one’s attention from the real goods and evils of which we ought to be aware (377-78). One might think of this ethical malady as a kind of Aristotelian obsessive-compulsive disorder which we would do well to avoid.

HVE, on the other hand, is not quite as demanding regarding one’s motivational structure for virtue. HVE, Merritt argues, requires only that virtuous traits or qualities “be relatively stable over time somehow or other [but] not that [they] should be stable through taking a special, self-sufficiently sustained psychological form” (378, emphasis mine). The implication here is that HVE would allow either internal motivation, external supports for virtue, or both; any combination that leads to reliably or consistently virtuous behavior would be acceptable in HVE, and whatever virtue we are considering “would be no less a genuine virtue” as a result (378). This also means, on a refined reading, that HVE would allow for a virtue to be no less a virtue if it were done from, say, regards of self-interest rather than (e.g.) justice or generosity. She thus admits that HVE may have “comparatively modest aspirations” when held up beside AVE, but that this modesty is not altogether bad since it does not demand a “sage-like perfection of personal character” (379). Rather, HVE concerns itself with someone's reliably producing

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While I acknowledge that I am no Hume scholar, Merritt's choice of the adjective 'Humean' for her view appears to stem from certain of Hume's comments like “no action can be virtuous, or morally good, unless there be in human nature some motive to produce it, distinct from the sense of its morality” (THN Bk. III, Part II, Sect. 1) and similarly (Ibid.) “tis a plain fallacy to say, that a virtuous motive is requisite to render an action honest, and at the same time that a regard to the honesty is the motive of the action.” These point to Hume's insistence that a virtuous action's motivation must be separate from the virtue or rightness of the action itself; perhaps this is why Merritt cites AVE's 'self-sufficiently sustained' virtues as instances of Hume's 'fallacious' circular reasoning. However, I argue later in this chapter (and the next) that while virtue can be self-sustaining, it requires much vigilance and is less 'invulnerable' than Merritt sees it.
the “welcome effects” of the virtues, essentially “avoiding human disaster and securing the basic goods of cooperative society” (379). [Merritt does not specify, in detail, what kinds of external motivations or props she has in mind, but she does mention certain kinds of institutions (schools, e.g.) which would be vital in shaping and supporting certain beliefs and attitudes.]

While acknowledging that the motivational self-sufficiency in AVE might be more reliable or stable than HVE, Merritt also admits that the former is “exceedingly rare” and that there is no real reason why the latter won’t suffice so long as it offers a commensurate degree of reliability in “serving the ends that the virtues are ideally supposed to serve” (380). Given the Humean shade to her concerns, these ends would be things that are socially approved and represent the welcome effects of certain human behaviors. All in all, Merritt argues, HVE gives us a more realistic shot at securing the actions and environments that the virtues are meant to bring about. It makes us less obsessive about our motivations (and their consistency or robustness) and lets us focus more clearly on living up to certain values, expectations, and norms that we (and others) endorse. Shifting to HVE focuses on attaining virtuous stability in the best way possible, given what appears to be the case about human psychology provided by the situationists, especially Doris. Since AVE seems impossibly demanding (if not downright counterproductive), Merritt suggests that we reasonably may dismiss it in favor of HVE if

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61 Following Rachel Cohon (personal correspondence, 10/21/2013) we must also note that Humean virtuous dispositions could require support from a community of which approves of such attitudes and actions. If so, it may be ‘modest’ in some of its aspirations, but it may also entail vast kinds of external props for one’s attitudes and actions!
the same level of virtuous reliability could be produced.

II. Objections and Analysis

Overall, I think that Merritt should be given credit for accepting the situationist criticism of AVE’s conception of character. She presents an initially plausible position: given empirical evidence, and what seems to be a much more accurate explanation of behavioral consistency, we ought to say that Aristotle is incorrect in his account of character and behavior. That is, there can be no such thing as a firm, settled, and unchangeable state of the soul which produces reliably virtuous behavior. There are no *hexeis*.

However, I have already argued against the situationist program and its particular interpretations of the empirical evidence. So, while I praise Merritt's effort to preserve something of virtue in the face of the situationist onslaught, I disagree with her conclusion that HVE is the logical choice when it comes to a post-situationist virtue theory. *If* situationism were correct about character, then HVE might be viable. But situationism is not correct about character, and thus HVE is only second best to AVE, if that. But, let me indulge in a thought-experiment here to bring out some important things about AVE that make it an even more worthwhile ethical theory, especially in a post-situationist climate. If we were to choose between HVE and AVE, what are the stakes? What might AVE have that HVE does not? I have identified four main areas in which Merritt's view falls short.
The Question of Moral Emotions. If we end up adopting Merritt's HVE, there may be an absurd result if such a theory is taken to its logical conclusion.\textsuperscript{62} Let us consider a case wherein someone, X, has committed theft because the relevant social conditions and structures were not in place to ensure X’s right behavior. Such a scenario seems plausible on Merritt’s view, since she argues about the social sustenance required for virtue. So, perhaps someone whom X admires is absent from the situation, and that person's attitudes about the wrongness of stealing can no longer act as sources of moral guidance for X. With such support, X would not steal. But, without that support, X in fact steals a certain item.\textsuperscript{63} The question I want to investigate is 'What should we make of things if X feels ashamed of his actions?'

On Merritt's view, there is no explicit, strong requirement that we feel shame or guilt about acting wrongly. This is just because such wrong actions were produced by the absence of important social buttresses, which absences fall mainly outside of our control. It seems that a person can be virtuous even if they lack a strong interior moral motivational structure. So, If X steals something (but wouldn't have if the other person were there), then what demand is there on X to recriminate himself for stealing? It isn't really X's fault on Merritt's view; if anything, it may even be the other person's fault for not being there!

Yet, if X does feel a profound sense of guilt for stealing, then what should we make of that? Merritt may have two responses open to her, here. The first is to explain,\textsuperscript{62} My thanks to Jason D'Cruz for suggesting this potential hazard for Merritt's argument

\textsuperscript{63} I suppose the opposite case would be true, too: X is forced to live among thieves, in a situation where pro-theft attitudes are prevalent, and there is great pressure for X to conform to such a value.
somehow, what such emotions represent and how they function under her HVE theory. What role does guilt play in this HVE? [Such a response may be helpful as a piece of theoretical development, but as it stands this would be a rather unhelpful IOU.] The other avenue is to deny that guilt has any moral importance, and is instead an almost 'epiphenomenal' emotion. Guilt is a vestigial emotion now; it may have been important in our past moral traditions, but it is far less important now. [Such a response seems patently false; guilt and shame, which I use interchangeably for this discussion, are emotions which are of supreme moral importance.] In either case, I argue, we are left with the puzzle of X's moral emotions after stealing. So, I want to say that Merritt's theory is either presently unable to explain the puzzle, or else it offers an explanation which clashes with what we typically believe about such emotions and their place in a good ethical life.

**Exemplars, Role Models, & Ideals.** Aristotle says in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (at 1104b11-13) that an “appropriate upbringing” is necessary for “correct education”; this is expanded upon in Book X (Ch. 9), where Aristotle discusses the role that the inculcation of correct habits plays in our moral education and that of our children. Essentially, children need the right kind of environment and the right influences in order to teach them about correct action, and develop habits which ensure that they (reliably) act virtuously as they grow up. “This is why legislators must, in some people's view, urge people toward virtue and *exhort them to aim at the fine,*” he says at 1180a7-8 (emphasis mine). Aristotle is here discussing the broad aim of politics, which is the designing and
promotion of laws and institutions that tend to create virtuous individuals; however, I think that the parallel can be drawn between the legislator promoting virtue in the state and the parents promoting virtue in the home. Thus, parents must urge their children towards virtue and try to instill in them the right beliefs for the right reasons, and see that they develop the right kinds of habits. Aristotle also realizes that children rely to a fair degree on mimicry as they grow up; thus, they must be taught as well as shown how to think and act rightly. Aside from rules and commands, they must have some kind of good example, a role model, perhaps, set before them to help them become good people.

I do not think that Merritt’s HVE is incompatible with some idea of moral role modeling, nor that she would necessarily disagree with Aristotle’s insistence on the role of example in teaching and inculcating right behavior. However, the phrase quoted above – that we must exhort them to ‘aim at the fine’ – may be telling. For Aristotle, we learn virtue as we learn other things, by theoretical example and practical application. So, in learning to become a fine archer, we have a teacher who gives us information like how to hold a bow, how to nock the arrow properly, etc., and he will show us proper technique so that we might imitate him in our practice. But, we accept as our ideal the perfect archer (who consistently hits the mark largely due to his or her own ability). As we practice, we hone our skills in imitation of our actual teacher, but also of this idealized archer, whether or not he really exists. We focus on an idealized version of our role model in order to inspire us, and aid us in correcting ourselves as we make progress.
and improve. A modern example: for a person trying to learn how to play basketball well, their coach’s instruction may be just as valuable as the thought of how an idealized player would handle a free-throw.

I think this is applicable to virtue in the following way: we are taught and shown to how to be virtuous, and we often mimic our instructors while keeping before us an ideal of the perfectly virtuous person. In times of uncertainty, we can ask ourselves what this sage might do to help clarify our own moral thinking, evaluations, and reasons for action. Our teachers give us the tools and precepts for right action, but the ideal can help us use these tools properly when our teachers are not available to help. Exemplars and role models play an indispensable role in our moral education and even in our moral thinking long after our education is over. This is something echoed by Linda Zagzebski⁶⁴, who says that “the practice of identifying exemplars” is “one of the most important features of [our] pretheoretical [ethical] practices.” Additionally, she states that “[a]ll we can do is the best we can do by using our faculties as conscientiously as we can, and our disposition to admiration is one of those faculties” (2010: 52). Moreover, when we think about how this exemplar would act well, I argue that we do not think about them acting from outside, socially-sustained virtues of the sort that HVE would endorse. Rather, we would cite this person's inner motivations, reasons, and feelings as the proper grounds of virtuous action. As Darcia Narvaez (2010) suggests, “moral exemplars [...] demonstrate holistic orientations between one or more psychological capacities. For example [...] quickly and accurately 'reading' a moral situation and determining needs

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and potential responses” (84). Moreover, such experts can “control personal [biases]” to be “morally responsive to others.” They are “skilled at reasoning about duty and consequences and assessing which potential action is most moral for the situation.” Finally, they “cultivate ethical self-regulation and ethical self-reflection. They foster an ethical identity that fosters habituated ethical concern” (84-85, all). Furthermore, she contends that ethical experts “have more and better organized knowledge about [right conduct], have highly tuned perceptual skills for it, have deep moral desire for it, and benefit from multiple automatized capacities. In short, they have more content knowledge and more process knowledge, more implicit and explicit conceptual and emotional knowledge” (85).

Let's consider all of this. I think it is plausible to say that we envision our moral exemplars as acting from within and able to overcome obstacles due to an exceptional internal constitution. The knowledge and psychological acuity that Narvaez attributes to ethical expertise reside in the agent and have been developed and cultivated. Thus, we look to the epistemological accuracy and characterological strength of will that such an expert possesses. This is just as the apprentice archer thinks of the ideal archer’s skill as something that will shine through despite mood, wind, or other arbitrary kinds of circumstances: the inner skill reveals itself. In ethics, such thoughts serve a vital function in giving us something to aim for when we are confused or unsure of ourselves, or even as we are receiving moral education.

Yet, there is room to question this. Merritt could insist that following role models
is still a dangerous practice, since we may end up putting ourselves in straits which a role
model could easily navigate, but which threaten us with imminent shipwreck. This is
because we are good imitators, but poor judges. It is easy to find an answer to 'What
would so-and-so do in this situation?' but it is less easy to carry out such a task. A
parallel exists among non-moral role models. For instance, if I idolize Arnold
Schwarzenegger's bodybuilding achievements, I may adopt him as my athletic role
model. I can easily find out how much weight Arnold lifted throughout his various
routines, and what exercises he typically combined for maximum effect. Yet, Merritt
could say, I run the danger of trying to match my skill level to Arnold's when I train. This
(i.e. deadlifting a quarter ton of iron) is clearly inadvisable, and I am liable to hurt myself
as a result. The novice ought to do as the expert says, but not necessarily as he does.
The moral dimension is now clearer: when we idolize (e.g.) the willpower of another, we
are prone to trying to match their ethical skill. Even if our role model could harmlessly
attend dinner at a flirtatious colleague's home, our attempts at such expert behavior
may (and often do) end up in tragedy. Such failures not only reinforce a sense of
caracter anomie, but they also perpetuate a kind of obsession with psychological
structures that are difficult to instantiate, even if they are now logically possible to
 instantiate.

These are excellent points; even if AVE is theoretically viable, we must assess its
practical viability. Yet, the objection rests on an interpretation of role-modeling that is
purely comprised of mimicry. That is, it is an unreflective kind of role-modeling. If I fail to
recognize that I shouldn't lift 500lbs. on my first workout, then there is something wrong with my judgment. In the same way, if I fail to recognize that my ethical role model's resistance to temptation is far better than my own, I am setting myself up for failure. Proper role-modeling, of the kind that AVE would promote, involves a requirement that the agent be able to grasp his or her own ethical abilities. There is a component of self-knowledge that is indispensable to being a virtuous person; Unreflective mimicry would not qualify, then, as role-modeling. I will argue more for this interpretation throughout the remainder of this chapter.

The Importance of the Virtuous Inner Life. Doing away with talk of moral 'interiority' may give us a much less fulfilling form of virtue ethics; thus, a main criticism of Merritt is that her account merely demands behavioral satisfaction (“Be reliable!”) and thus does not demand enough of a virtuous agent with regard to inner motivations, reasons, or emotions. In the picture of HVE that Merritt paints for us, the virtuous person just is the person who acts reliably or regularly well (read: in accordance with the typical outward manifestations of the virtues). Sally gives money to charity when it seems proper to do so, therefore Sally is generous.

But, it seems not to matter on this account whether or not Sally endorses, enjoys, or respects what she is doing. Ideally, she would; but, placing the emphasis on reliable behavior obviates this as a requirement for virtue! Of course, AVE would insist that the endorsement, enjoyment, and respect for giving to charity be present as the virtuous motivation and feelings themselves. But, Merritt's proposed HVE may threaten
to render such inner states as happy coincidences to proper behavior. At the least, there seems to be little hope that we can motivate and sustain such states by ourselves. So, when it comes down to it, I argue that AVE presents a much richer and more substantial understanding of what it means to be virtuous, as opposed to acting reliably virtuously.

The absence of a certain kind of harmony between inner states and outward actions makes Merritt's account attractive if situationism's key arguments succeeded. But, this isn't the case. So, why settle for second best now, when we can talk about and encourage just this kind of virtuous harmony in AVE? Once again, I call to mind AVE's emphasis on living a holistic ethical life (cf. Chapter One).

**Ethical Confidence & Resistance.** Merritt argues that virtue can be reliably produced when it is socially-sustained, i.e. when it becomes part of the institutions and attitudes of a place. The 'hollow' virtue\(^{65}\) that her HVE presents to us could potentially receive all of its bolstering from the outside, from those same institutions and socially-sustained attitudes. Reliability and regularity are the key features, and achieving them is more important than the actual influence that we can identify for our good behavior. I agree with Merritt's emphasis on crafting good social influences but still deny her suggestion that we become Humeans, because virtue absent self-sufficiency really doesn't seem like virtue. Where is the emphasis on self-discipline and resistance to negative outside influences that comes with ethical self-reliance? When we lose this, something that I argue a solid understanding of phronesis encompasses, we seem to plunge even more into a type of character anomie in which we need not even worry

\(^{65}\) I call it 'hollow' because it lacks any substantial inner ethical component
about where our ethical motivation comes from. This thought is striking and unsettling because the sources and motives behind our actions matter to us, and to how we evaluate the moral worth of an action. This kind of ethical insight is what Aristotelian theory provides, and what Merritt's compromise theory lacks.

Further: while promoting virtuous kinds of social institutions and practices is a welcome and necessary strategy, we must remember that such entities are only as reliable as the people who do the institutionalizing and the practicing. Without cultivating the robust inner ethical life, I argue that we are again heading down a dangerous path, because socially-sustained virtue is insufficient. We must learn to build up reserves of the ethical self-confidence that only comes with a good view of what we can do by ourselves, i.e. from inner ethical resources. Again, what happens when our teachers or influences are not there to guide us? Is it really plausible to live on an external 'ethical tether' at all times? And, we still need to understand how the practices and institutions themselves will be sustained to serve as the necessary supports.

There is a component of judgment and wisdom to living a virtuous life that would allow us, for example, to see that Sally isn't really generous because she just gives away money and property to feel better about herself or to get some tax write-offs. While she acts in accordance with what her environment identifies as good behavior, she lacks an understanding that what she is doing really is what she ought to be doing for its own sake. This agent-specific cognitive aspect seems absent or at least heavily diminished, and thus Merritt's view of HVE only embraces a part of the larger picture: a
part that I have argued is crucial to full virtue.

We need ethical wisdom to show us that we ought not to act in the way that Sally acts, even though she ostensibly does what is right. Instead, we need to understand what it is that Sally is doing, why she is doing it, and what sorts of motivations and reasons she is responding to (and in what ways) when she acts generously. This is the surest way to cultivate a defense against simply riding the social tide when it comes to our ethical values and behavior, and will help to mitigate social pressures on the agent which may subtly (or not) pull him into vice. Being able to understand and do the right thing for oneself is the highest achievement; while it may not be impossible under HVE, there is potential for it to be reduced to a form of mere behaviorism without that important cognitive component. AVE would not accept such a view of virtue, and would not place agents in such a precarious position.

With these four considerations, it should be clear that Merritt's Humean approach seems ill-suited as a desirable theory of virtue in the post-situationist world. At least, in a post-situationist world where we rightly reject situationism! We can, and should, retain AVE for the reasons that (i) the situationist challenge has failed, and (ii) it gives us ethical features that matter deeply to us. However, what the situationists (and even Merritt) have highlighted is the requirement that a virtuous person be situationally aware and cognizant of the features of his or her own social embeddedness. These are aspects of knowledge which will bear on reasons for action, and thus they fall under the bailiwick of that all-important faculty of *phronesis*. So, in the next section, I explain more
about what this faculty does and how it should be understood to deal with the kind of dangers that situationism warned us about.

III. A Phronesis of Fragility: Preliminary Remarks

There is a strong bias towards downplaying the impact of one's surroundings and one's social embeddedness when explaining ethical behavior. This much has been successfully established by situationist arguments. And, there is a wide assumption in Western philosophical traditions that agents are largely 'atomistic' and that reasons and actions stem independently from one's milieu. As social science (broadly) and situationism (specifically) teaches us, this is not the case. The reasons for any given action may be subtle, if not imperceptible, and may not even fall within the agent's understanding or (necessarily) control. This is one of the most valuable points that the situationists have brought to light for contemporary philosophers, and one that is indispensable for future ethical theorizing.

Ethical theory is not done for the sake of the fully virtuous, but rather for those who aspire to understand, and someday reach, the place where full virtue resides. This work is for the ethical seekers and searchers, those of continence and fledgling virtue who are always trying to improve themselves and do better. It is for us that a study of practical wisdom is necessary and useful, not for those who already have it (though philosophers will want to know what phronesis is, whether they have it or not!). Our successes and failures in ethical judgment and action are products of an equation which
weighs factors like personality, values, judgment, and social situation. Many times, we
hit the target just shy of the bulls-eye or else we miss the center altogether; to
paraphrase Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, there are infinite ways to get it wrong,
and we typically veer towards these danger zones. Understanding the factors that are
apt to draw us away from the bulls-eye, *especially* social and situational ones, is
necessary to any useful faculty of ethical judgment. The fully virtuous may have better
constitutions than the rest of us, but they still may find themselves on the precipice now
and then. In any case, I see practical wisdom as the key element in living a good life.
However, molding and revising one's judgment is dependent on understanding one's
own social roles and situations, and how these interact with one's beliefs, attitudes, and
values. In short, the situationists teach us that full *phronesis* depends on an agent's
knowledge of his or her own social embeddedness. And, this is not something alien to
Aristotle's own approach to virtue; I will discuss this in more detail soon.

But, before I flesh this out in more detail, I want to consider a preliminary
objection: one might object that this sounds similar to the understanding of practical
wisdom that is endorsed by Doris (2002: 146-48), as the faculty by which we can judge
situational and social factors in order to remove ourselves from potentially disruptive
environments. Doris argues that this can lead to a better understanding of ourselves and
our ethical problem areas, and promote better conduct through judging when and were
we should have our interactions. This is an understanding readily endorsed by Samuels &
Casebeer (2005) and, according to those authors, this kind of ethical thinking is key to
any substantial attempts at 'character' development. However, there is a key difference between what I am promoting and what Doris and the others are recommending: knowledge of what to avoid is necessary, but certainly not sufficient for a solid account of practical wisdom. Using only this knowledge turns the putative phronimos into little more than an 'ethical ostrich' who buries his head in the sand whenever there is potential to act badly. We certainly need to know when to shape our environments to be conducive to right action, but I argue that practical wisdom encapsulates more than just an avoidance strategy. Indeed, such a strategy appears fraught with the potential to backfire on those who employ it to improve their ethical behavior.

My reply hearkens back to some reasons for dismissing Merritt's view above: firstly, this recommended avoidance strategy contributes to a psychological understanding of the agent as unable to trust him- or herself, which may be devastating to ethical self-esteem. To borrow a common phrase from applied ethical arguments, we see the danger of a 'slippery slope' which could produce more and more ethical failures with time. Secondly, as a matter of practicality, we cannot always 'shape' our environments to promote our ethical success. Rather, a degree of ethical insulation or internal resistance must be cultivated for cases where we are unable to avoid vice or temptation. And, while I do not endorse Maria Merritt's (2000) HVE, I do endorse something she says in a later article66 which is applicable here: "[t]he capacity for sound

66 Maria Merritt (2009). “Aristotelian Virtue and the Interpersonal Aspect of Ethical Character.” Journal of Moral Philosophy 6, 23-49. This citation comes from p. 42 of the same. Merritt uses this quote admonishingly, to remind us that deliberation must be used to check our regular (but often too speedy) decisions which often miss the mark when it comes to virtuous action.
ethical deliberation is of little use if we fail to employ it on occasions that call for it.” We cannot ignore our abilities to think reflectively about our own ethical lives; if we do not use them when they are most needed, then there seems to be little point in urging that such abilities be nurtured and cultivated.

In short: we must appreciate the focal role that inner ethical motivation plays in sound ethical deliberation and decision, while also acknowledging various external influences on an agent. But, such acknowledgment must be ancillary to, and not in place of, a kind of self-sustaining virtue. An agent's knowledge of herself qua social actor will expand her opportunities for virtue, since she can reflect on social factors which contribute to poor ethical judgment and commit herself to recognizing and overcoming or resisting them. This knowledge will strengthen her capability to judge and act correctly, but will not supplant any internal virtuous motivations. [I discuss these points throughout the remainder of the chapter.] Thus, the objectors have only part of the picture in view when they declare that avoidance is key. My view of practical wisdom offers the full ethical panorama instead, and I focus on this in the next section.

IVa: A Refinement of Phronesis as Sensitivity

According to Peggy DesAutels (1998), “[p]hilosophers have long discussed how an agent should reason about ethical situations and dilemmas, but have failed adequately to address how agents go about determining morally relevant saliencies in their everyday lives” (266). Such an observation is telling, since it bears directly on the
topic of this dissertation. *Phronesis* includes, but is not reducible to, correct reasoning about what to do. It is true that such reasoning is required in situations wherein the agent has time to deliberate and consider important factors of a situation. Many authors, especially Ando (1971) and Michelakis (1961) have provided detailed analyses of the term and I will not re-hash their work here. I take it for granted that *phronesis* involves, as Michelakis (1961: 23) claims, “right reason directed towards action.”

But we must also understand *phronesis* as John McDowell (1979) understands it, as a certain kind of sensitivity or perception of ethically relevant features which a situation may present to the agent. McDowell emphasizes that the virtuous agent, e.g. a kind agent, “has a *reliable sensitivity* to a certain sort of requirement which situations impose on behaviour. The deliverances of a reliable sensitivity are cases of knowledge; and there are idioms according to which the sensitivity itself can appropriately be described as knowledge: a kind person knows what it is like to be confronted with a requirement of kindness” (142). Therefore, the sensitivity can be seen as “*a sort of perceptual capacity*” (142, emphasis mine). And, the benefit of McDowell's account is that this sensitivity can produce virtuous conduct without the requirement that the agent engage in protracted or even conscious deliberation of the kind that Michelakis (e.g.) describes. McDowell's account allows that “the appropriate action need not be elicited by a consideration apprehended as a reason – even a conclusive reason – for acting in a certain way” (144).

All of this means that a virtuous person, possessing *phronesis*, simply is better at
discerning the moral dimensions of experience and taking them as reasons for action. Not only that, but such knowledge can lead to right action simply by the agent's own phenomenological reading of a situation. Agents with heightened moral sensitivity simply experience the world in a different way than those with lower sensitivity.

Moral sensitivity also impacts one's moral judgment. Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, and Thoma (1999), following a Kohlbergian approach to analyzing moral psychology, found that “[moral sensitivity] precedes [moral judgment], but the components do not follow each other in a set temporal order – as there are complex feed-forward and feedback loops, and complex interactions” (102). This is directly applicable to our study of practical wisdom; this means that phronesis not only results in appropriate moral judgments about a situation, which lead to appropriate action, but that such judgments reinforce one's sensitivity to morally relevant features of a situation. As I become more aware of the moral features which surround me, I become a better judge of what the appropriate action really is for a given situation. Such appropriate action validates the sensitivity, and encourages it to expand. The sensitivity and awareness are mutually reinforcing, and are at least partly constitutive of the psychological and ethical holism that is characteristic of a virtuous person. 67

Yet, the strength of this analysis still resides in the potential for an agent to act without protracted deliberation. People can, and often do, perform all sorts of actions

67 The point about mutual reinforcement seems to stand even if one believes, as Wisnewski & Jacoby (2007) do (when they discuss the work of Lawrence Blum) that “advocacy of the category of moral perception does not entail the rejection of moral judgment as a category. Rather, it entails recognizing that moral judgments admit of significant perceptual pre-conditions, and that these pre-conditions are themselves morally assailable. Judgment simply does not capture the immediacy of moral perception, it is instead a response to such perception” (235, emphasis mine).
without actively thinking about them beforehand. One can act from conscious, articulated reasons (cf. the famous practical syllogism) or one can act because of a kind of immediate perceptual awareness which impels her toward an appropriate deed. In either case, we see a side of practical wisdom at work. That is, each face or aspect of phronesis has its own natural domain in moral psychology, though the two aspects are mutually supportive and mutually reinforcing. DesAutels (1998) understands such a distinction in terms of a divide between “abstract” moral perception (involving protracted reasoning about particular saliences, and possibly about plugging them into moral rules) and “concrete” moral perception (in which subtle moral saliencies of real-time situations are recognized in the continuous stream of events, often by 'reading' other people's behaviors and speech). I adopt this terminology as one way of understanding the natural domains of each aspect of practical wisdom; abstract moral perception involves right reason applied to deliberation about action, while concrete moral perception involves the recognition and near-instantaneous apprehension of morally significant features of a situation.

Practical wisdom is not only good deliberation, but good detection. We must train ourselves to look for 'hidden' moral meanings in the features of our lives that seem morally neutral. This capacity to examine and discern is what we are looking for when we construct our phronesis after situationism. Admittedly, it is a comprehensive and...
ambitious idea, but as Troels Engberg-Pedersen remarks, the *phronimos* must “have a profound insight into the whole human condition” (1983: 222). Little wonder, then, that it is so demanding! Yet, from now on, this fuller definition is what I mean by the term *phronesis* (and its various renderings into English).

Yet, an objector could dig in here and claim that our perceptions and sensitivities are too malleable. DesAutels (1998) concedes that sensitivities to moral salience may be remarkably flexible depending on situations. For instance, in discussing Carol Gilligan's work, DesAutels points out that “a woman switching from working as a nurse (arguably care-oriented work) to working as a traffic officer (arguably more justice-orientated work), may well switch quite easily from a care to a justice 'orientation’” (270). The upshot here is that what agents perceive as morally significant may shift as they take on different roles, responsibilities, and commitments. On its face, there is nothing here which argues against my suggestion. In fact, I argue later in this chapter that such shifting may often help us navigate our moral experiences with greater facility. The challenge comes not from shifting orientations *per se*, but rather from determining which principles are transferable (and even transgressable) in each case. Superstitious worship of either care principles or justice principles is equally to be avoided. Instead, the practically wise person is knowledgeable in each realm and can apply principles as needed, even if they should happen to come from these 'opposing' categories.

Another challenge is brought up by DesAutels when she notes Lawrence Blum's observation that characteristic moral sensitivities can fail to be unified. For instance, “an
agent who is sensitive to discomfort in adults but not in children” fails to show a unified sensitivity to something widely considered to be of great moral importance, i.e. apparent human suffering (270). But again, this only highlights a limitation (a kind of perceptual ignorance) on the part of the agent. This does not argue against the role of moral sensitivity in acting well, nor does it demonstrate that such unified sensitivities cannot be achieved or are not transferable. Therefore, we can only remonstrate with the ignorant agent since he is culpable for what is literally understood as an oversight.

Let me summarize where I stand, then: Phronesis is a capacity with dual aspects, one of rational deliberation and one of immediate recognition. But there are still questions that need to be addressed. For example, just what kind of sensitivity are we talking about?

As a start, I examine work by Lovett and Jordan (2010), which labels a faculty like phronesis as a normative sensitivity. That is, it is the ability to pick out relevant moral features of a situation, where 'moral' is delineated by the (meta)ethical work done in AVE. Yet, it is not just about picking out moral features of a situation as if they were items on a shelf. It takes much effort to cultivate proper moral awareness which can sift through all of the features of a situation, and determine (i) which are morally important, and (ii) which one takes precedence. In a recent paper, Jana Lone (2013) characterizes Aristotelian moral sensitivity as a “natural faculty that can be developed over time and with training. For Aristotle, it is the development of our faculty for moral perception that eventually can lead to the intuitive recognition of the salient aspects of complex ethical
problems” (172). This kind of sensitivity is a “way of seeing” (180), and with it we are able to “apprehend [moral] features of experience that are not obvious without training” (179). Further, this way of seeing a situation not only depends on the objective physical environment, but following Snow (2010) it is heavily dependent on the background values and commitments that each agent imparts to his or her own understanding of the world. *Phronesis* is the moral way of seeing, in which an agent is able to both identify what is morally important and make that the chief filter by which she interprets and understands her experiences. As suggested before, cultivating this side of *phronesis* means cultivating a new phenomenology.

An example will help to clarify Snow’s point. Let us take two people who both witness an act of violent intimidation in the form of bullying. Each may rush to offer assistance, spurred on by the recognition that such acts are immoral and that they are typically representative of a situation where the victim requires aid. Call this a ‘first order’ moral salience, i.e. an instant apprehension of a situation’s (im)morality and an appropriate course of action. The correct recognition of first order moral saliences would be, I argue, indicative of practical wisdom. But, each *ex hypothesi* practically wise agent in this example may be struck by different *underlying* saliences, upon which the situation's first order saliences supervene. These 'second order' moral saliences may be recognitions like “The victim is being manipulated by an unjust assertion of physical power” for agent #1, but agent #2 may recognize that “The victim is likely to need emotional comforting”. Agent #1 and agent #2 have different core commitments in their
moral lives (justice vs. caring, for example) which constitute their second order saliences. Yet, each agent acts appropriately to intervene in the bullying situation even though they may explain their apprehension of a first order moral salience by referring to perceived second order saliences. For instance, agent #1 may argue that the situation was immoral due to its injustice, while agent #2 may appeal to the emotional distress of the bullied party as constituting the first order salience.

And, aside from perceptual and intellectual recognition, there is a strong affective (emotional) component to be found in the discernment of first and second order moral saliences. As agents, humans often feel first, think second, and act third. Rest (1986)\textsuperscript{69} says that 'there are no moral cognitions completely devoid of affect', and that moral sensitivity is “a combination of one's recognition of moral issues and how one reacts and processes these issues from an affective perspective within a social context”. This definition has been elaborated upon to include interpreting the feelings and reactions of others, empathizing and role-taking abilities, understanding how actions will bear on the welfare of self and others, and making inferences from others' behavior and responding appropriately (326). This elaboration is important, because it demonstrates the centrality of the emotions in mature moral cognition. Aristotle and contemporary authors in the AVE tradition argue strongly that the emotions can be trained and habituated to clue us into the morality of potential action, imminent or distant, as well as those actions we have already done.

A less nebulous way to talk about this metaphorical way of seeing is to invoke the

\textsuperscript{69} In Jordan (2007), p. 326

121
psychological language of a 'schema.' Lapsley & Hill (2008) discuss theories of moral heuristics in which they examine the concept of a moral schema. Following Narvaez, they define 'schemas' as “general knowledge structures that organise information, expectations, and experience” (322). I contend that the possession of a certain kind of moral schema is indicative of phronesis. That is, the moral way of seeing things equates to having a moral schema which is “chronically accessible [i.e. frequently activated] for appraising one's social landscape.” Such schemas “are easily primed by environmental cues because they are at a higher state of activation than are non-accessible schemas” (322, all). Further, a chronically accessible schema is one which “directs our attention selectively to only certain features of our experience; it disposes us to select schema-compatible life goals, tasks, and contexts that further canalise and maintain our dispositional tendencies; it encourages us to develop highly practiced behavioural routines in those areas demarcated by chronically accessible schemas which provide 'a ready, sometimes automatically available plan of action in such life contexts’” (322). I leave the psychological conversation here for now, though another discussion of automaticity will emerge at the end of the chapter.

IVb. Objections to Sensitivity & Perception?

So far, I have argued for a reading of phronesis that is double-sided, not only abstract but also concrete. But, there are problems associated with a position which endorses the concept of moral perception as a way of seeing or perceiving moral
properties in the physical world. First and foremost, it is necessary to explain just what moral perception is. So, I provide a limited defense moral perception based on the work of Robert Audi (2010) in order to ground my project and demonstrate its initial plausibility.

Audi (2010) points out that “[m]oral perception is not an exact analogue of physical perception, at least of perceiving everyday visible objects seen in normal light” (87). This is because “moral properties are not easily conceived as observable, in what seems the most elementary way” (87). That is, you can easily observe the taking of A's wallet by B, but it is difficult to maintain that you saw the wrongness of the physical event that you witnessed. This is an oft-cited argument against the reality of moral properties in the universe, and needs to be taken quite seriously for an account (like mine) which depends to some degree on moral realism's being true.

Audi suggests that we might distinguish, though, between “perceptual representations of an ordinary sensory kind and perceptual representation of a richer kind” (89). Audi's theory does, in fact, “construe seeing certain subsets of base properties for [e.g.] injustice as – at least given appropriate understanding of their connection to moral properties – a kind of perception of a moral property” (90). Indeed, Audi continues, “this kind [of perception] includes seeing a seizure of an old man's wallet and hearing an abusive vulgarity screamed at a conference speaker” (90). These are instances of sensory perception which, representative as they are of base

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70 A 'base' property here refers to an action or event that is perceived and which, more often than not, is representative of a moral or immoral act.
properties of unjust deeds, immediately induce a phenomenological “sense of wrongdoing” about the situation (90). Further, Audi doesn’t preclude some moral knowledge being inferential, i.e. that we “infer [the moral property] from what we visually know and background propositions we already believe.” The attraction is that for at least some cases of moral knowledge, “we need not posit an inference, as opposed to a kind of belief-formation that is a response to a recognized pattern [...] for certain kinds of interpretation” (91, all). This approach falls under what Andrew Cullison (2009) calls ‘Weak Moral Empiricism’, the view that “[w]e have perceptual knowledge that moral properties are instantiated because we directly perceive properties that are regularly correlated with moral properties” (169). In that case, Audi’s is an appealing analysis of moral perception which supports the view I want to incorporate into phronesis. And, it happens to avoid the issue of the ‘observability’ of moral facts and properties. Yet, there are still other related worries.

It should be noted that Audi (2010) remains agnostic as to whether or not moral properties must interact causally with the agent in order to produce a case of moral knowledge. Such an argument is typically used against theories of moral realism, and is often known as the ‘Causal Objection’. However, I – along with Audi – will remain agnostic on this point. It is not my goal here to defend moral realism in itself, but only to demonstrate that there is good reason to think that moral properties are observable and perceivable by human agents.
V: *Phronesis* and Social Embeddedness

So far, I have shown that moral properties can be perceived, and that such perception is important for *phronesis* as a faculty of moral psychology. But we can still ask, 'What kinds of things must we be sure to include in our deliberating? What kinds of features must we be sensitive to?' Well, the easy response is 'the ones that matter.' But, this is unilluminating: virtuous people pick up on things that matter because they matter. So, we will need to be clearer in explaining just what constitutes the domain of *phronesis* in the wake of situationism. Specifically, I must discuss the idea of social embeddedness, and how this informs one’s moral deliberations and sensitivities.

First, we must acknowledge that an agent perceives him- or herself as a certain kind of person, with certain characteristics, from certain kinds of backgrounds and traditions, and all of these may influence what features of a situation spark ethical attention or awareness. That is, what I shall call one’s 'social heritage' is important to how one views and understands the world. It is also an important item to be assessed when deliberating about how to act well. Social heritage is made up not only of one's cultural background, but also the roles and responsibilities a person has *qua* social actor. [This can also include an understanding of the kind of social signals that one is likely to send to others, as well as estimates of how others are likely to respond to such signals.]

There is much support for the centrality of social heritage in ethical thought. Yet, perhaps the most articulate summary comes from Alastair MacIntyre (1984), who remarks, “I confront the world as a member of this family, this household, this clan, this
tribe, this city, this nation, this kingdom. There is no 'I' apart from these [... i]t is always as a part of an ordered community that I have to seek the human good, and in this sense of community the solitary anchorite or the shepherd on the remote mountainside is as much a member of a community as is a dweller in cities” (172-73).

So, phronesis isn't as simple as knowing a lot of obvious moral facts, like 'murder is wrong' or 'crying children need comforting.' It also includes an attentiveness to one's own social heritage. But, there is another component here which may otherwise go unnoticed by the untrained and unmotivated. Let us call this an acknowledgement of 'social pressures' which includes both an affective branch and a behavioral branch. The affective branch of social pressures includes the subtle, mood-altering factors about which situationists have warned us. These are difficult to detect, but doing so enables an agent to act so as to mitigate their potential negative effects on behavior. The same point can be said for the behavioral branch of social pressures, which are social and situational factors which tend to push agents towards a certain kind of behavior (e.g. obedience or conformity, as in the Milgram experiment). However, the point of knowing about social heritage is not to somehow be able to mitigate such a heritage (to become 'acultural' or 'outside culture', so to speak). Instead, the point of acknowledging one's social heritage is to be able to understand and interpret the patterns of thought and response that one typically has. Moreover, analysis and reflection upon social heritage can broaden the scope of one's ethical deliberations by incorporating new data which may carry moral significance. [I say something about this later in this chapter, but I also
touch on this in Chapter Five's discussion of moral imagination.]

Here is where we stand, then: these two categories (social heritage and social pressures) constitute one's social embeddedness. Knowledge of these categories increases one's chances for living and acting well. Sometimes this knowledge will mean the difference between acting appropriately vs. acting inappropriately, but in other cases, such knowledge will mean the difference between acting appropriately and acting most appropriately. Here is a diagram which helps to lay out this proposed taxonomy:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Embeddedness</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Heritage</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affective</td>
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Table 4.1 – The Branches of Social Embeddedness

Yet, there may still be a point of confusion. One might acknowledge that knowing about social pressures (so as to mitigate them) is obviously beneficial for *phronesis*. But, it seems unclear how knowledge of social heritage can increase one's chances for ethical success. Therefore, let us examine a sample case to help understand this important aspect of social embeddedness. But before I produce such a case, it is helpful to hear more of Alastair MacIntyre's opinion on the matter. MacIntyre (1984) explains that “[w]e cannot [...] characterize behavior independently of intentions, and we cannot characterize intentions independently of the settings which make those intentions intelligible both to agents themselves and to others” (206). Hence, it is right to
acknowledge that “we all approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity [...] As such, I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations.” Because of this inheritance, we are able to draw out our own moral identity.

“These [inheritances] constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point,” says MacIntyre. “This is in part what gives my life its own moral particularity” (220, all). I argue that full *phronesis* may require that an agent, in considering what to do through protracted deliberation, or in apprehending something morally important about a situation, be mindful of his or her social inheritances. This does not mean that *all* agents at *all* times must be aware of their social heritage; rather, it suggests that knowledge of social heritage can only help an agent's ethical deliberation, and may often be the tipping point between – as I said before – acting appropriately and acting *most* appropriately.

Imagine Professor Smith, a history teacher, is giving a talk at a local college about the US government's apparent lack of concern for slavery reparations. Smith, a white male, is speaking to a mixed crowd, but one which is primarily composed of black men and women. Smith provides a cogent argument for *not* paying reparations to descendents of African slaves, and cites plausible pieces of evidence for his position (including minority scholarship and assistance programs, current financial constraints, etc.). Yet, in a heated discussion after the talk, Smith is pressed on his argument and he blurts out the following: “The government doesn't need to make amends for slavery,
since we don't have any more slaves today! And, I don't own any slaves... why should I have to provide a hand out today to someone who isn't a slave, whose great granddad was a slave 200 years ago?"

Phronesis in Smith's choice of response is conspicuous by its absence. Not only has Smith said something offensive, he has said something that strongly suggests he lacks a kind of concern or compassion. Yet, such a vicious blunder could have been avoided if (i) Smith had a better control of his own temper, but more importantly (ii) Smith was more aware of his own social heritage in the robust sense, which includes the likely signals he sends to others and how they will be received. For instance, as an educated white male (themselves all potent status categories), Smith ought to have reflected on how he may be perceived by a predominantly black audience before he even started to argue for his position. His inappropriate response only makes things worse, betraying that Smith is either ignorant of the crass insensitivity of his remarks or else is unconcerned by it. Moreover, it means that Smith is ignorant of who he is and what such an identity represents to others. In either case, Smith ought to have been more tactful in choosing a defense for what might be an already unpopular position. Practical wisdom (either as prior deliberative concern, or as immediate recognition, about such social facts) could have ensured that Smith conducted himself in a far more appropriate manner.

When considering my points above about social embeddedness, it is clear that I advocate a more ecological turn for phronesis in my work, in the sense of the term
offered by John Riker (1991: 150) when he remarks that “[e]cological thinkers keep present the fullness of relationships and the fullness of background.” These kind of thinkers are in contrast to what Riker calls “nonecological” thinkers, who “lose themselves in the isolated focus of a specific context” (150). *Phronesis* appears to have been understood for too long as something nonecological. The definition of 'right reason' denotes a kind of parochial task-behavior undertaken by agents conceived as acting separately from their social backgrounds. McDowell's argument about *phronesis* as a sensitivity or awareness helps to check some of this baggage, but I argue that my view (which incorporates social embeddedness) presents a much more comprehensive account of what *phronesis* encompasses.

A faculty which appreciates the complexity of our moral lives and situations, and helps us adjust our aim in tough situations, seems like the kind of *phronesis* that we have been seeking. This means, again, a shift towards Riker's understanding of ecology: “[e]cological thinkers not only see and understand webs of relationships, they locate themselves in these networks. They accept Heisenberg's discovery that observers affect the world they are observing: the observer is an integral part of the observed, and the observed is an integral part of the observer” (151). And, while ecological thinking is needed, the importance of focused analysis and contemplation cannot be given up; this can produce a tension which is sometimes uncomfortable yet profoundly necessary and rewarding: “[i]t is to have the sparkling diamond of clear analysis set in the rich bonds of memory” (153). This, though, is far from a deterrent or an admission of irrelevance;
rather, it is only an admission that our social webs are incredibly complicated and that absent a clear, codified system of castes or ranks it is often unclear just what expectations and obligations each of us has. Knowing about the social self in an ecological way is not impossible, as Riker explains: “[i]n requiring us to be aware of our emotional, natural, historical, and cultural roots, ecological thinking is only asking us to make conscious what is unconscious” (152).

To summarize: if one takes seriously what I have said about phronesis as it must be understood in the post-situationist climate, then it must be admitted that such wisdom will be difficult to come by in its complete form. Yet, this is consistent with AVE’s tenet that virtue requires rigorous moral education and development. In the next section, I say a little more about the concepts of reflective self-knowledge, and its pivotal importance to a rich ethical life.

VI: Contemplation and Self-Knowledge

I have laid out a pretty demanding program for those on the path to virtue; not only must we reason properly, but we must have a very finely-tuned sensitivity to the important moral features of situations, whether overt or covert. This requires a lot of experience and practice, but it also requires a lot of self-understanding and self-knowledge. But, this is not something that is beyond the reach of human beings; it is not an unattainable omniscience. In fact, it seems that we all know someone who is acutely in touch with just the sorts of concerns I’ve brought out above. We all have a person in
our lives whose explanations of their own actions (or of their ethical advice to us) forces us to remark 'Oh, I never even thought of that!'

But, these people are, like the fully virtuous, fairly rare. What can we do to put ourselves on the right path, then, even if it is a long and difficult one? One easy way to take the bull by the horns is for an agent to make time to reflectively consider his or her own overall milieu. Out of the twenty four hours in each day, certainly some time is available for philosophical reflection of this kind! My argument here is not complicated, but it is important: good judgment requires knowing who you are, where you are, and what you are likely to encounter. These things are encompassed by ecological social knowledge.

Virtue, in the Aristotelian fashion, requires a fair amount of contemplation and self-knowledge. As Nancy Sherman (1989: 30) remarks, “Aristotle insists as a requirement of virtue that we be open to inquiry and a reflective grasp of our ends. This includes reflection on our ends, conceived not abstractly but embodied and clothed in concrete circumstance. Only in this way do we actively reflect on our selves and on our lives.” We need to make sure that we are doing the right things in the right ways by reflection and, I argue, a kind of ethical vigilance: “the Aristotelian emphasis on self-knowledge within the good life [...] leaves room for – indeed encourages – this sort of self-surveillance” (Ibid.: 38).

Let me offer an illustration to help flesh out my ideas: Doris (2002: 147) presents a case wherein someone is invited to dinner by “a colleague with whom [he has] had a
long flirtation” during a time when “[he is] temporarily orphaned while [his] spouse is out of town.” Picture yourself in such a position; Doris admonishes that “you might think there is little cause for concern; you are, after all, an upright person [...] On the other hand, if you take the lessons of situationism to heart, you avoid the dinner like the plague, because you know that you are not able to confidently predict your behavior in a problematic situation on the basis of your antecedent values” (Ibid.). It seems you must either accept the possibility of blundering into an affair or else avoid dinner because you are too insecure. As I have argued, situationism and maybe even HVE would promote the second option. Does this mean that AVE recommends the first? Not necessarily.

If I am the 'upright person' who is too absorbed and confident in my uprightness, then perhaps I do have something to worry about. Hubris of all types is frequently repaid with sorrow (just ask the Greek dramatists) and the overconfident agent may well end up falling short of what he thought he could faithfully endure. But this is just as much of a mistake, potentially, as avoiding all occasions of uncertainty as the situationist would want you to. Overconfidence is just as vicious as lack of confidence in this case.

So, AVE, embracing a phronesis of fragility, would have the agent think on the invitation for a few minutes. It would call for assessing the situation based on an understanding of one's values (fidelity to a spouse, amicability with a colleague), one's roles (spouse, colleague, perhaps role model to children or others), and situational pressures (possible alcohol, a 'romantic' ambiance, a feeling of loneliness). 71 What

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71 This is not an exhaustive list of concerns, but I feel it is representative enough for the purpose of my example.
should the subject do here?

Perhaps, if he feels too vulnerable to the situation, he will decline the invitation. Or, he might feel just confident enough in himself that he accepts with no ill consequences. But, there are other options that present themselves: changing the meeting place to a more 'neutral' location, foregoing the wine altogether, or having a candid talk about the entire detrimental flirtation all seem like options given the conjunction of values, roles, and situational factors. Appreciating these, I argue, is more conducive to making the right decision than seeing the options as strictly dichotomous, as either 'Yes (imminent mistake)' or 'No (possible insult to colleague).’ You are more able to act according to your values, and the expectations not only of yourself, but of what virtue requires of someone in your exact position.\(^\text{72}\)

This decision is, also, a function of the expectations and understanding of yourself as an ethical agent. A high degree of ethical self-knowledge is required for all kinds of decisions, but the hard cases are where such knowledge becomes indispensable for right action. Am I the person who tends to blunder into situations with crass over-confidence? Am I the one who caves to pressures and influence? Am I the one who manages to find other solutions to a problem which are closer to the mean? Social and situational knowledge can only be employed by an accurate grasp of one's own ethical development, including blindspots and danger zones.\(^\text{73}\) This is why good \textit{phronesis}\(^\text{72}\)

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\(^{72}\) It should be noted, of course, that the \textit{phronimos} probably wouldn't have engaged in a long flirtation in the first place. However, the person in this example lacks full practical wisdom, even if he might be able to find a way to extricate himself from trouble which is appropriate.

\(^{73}\) Technically, once discovered they may not be blindspots anymore, but they still would exist as areas wherein we tend to overlook certain features or aspects of situations. Perhaps the phrase danger zones is by itself sufficient here, though the word 'blindspot' conveys much of importance.
(perhaps a repetitive phrase) is only achieved through brutally honest reflection on one's own life, values, background, actions, and attitudes.

I admit: where Doris has perhaps de-intellectualized virtue, I have perhaps come too close to over-intellectualizing it, at least in a few ways. However, when it comes to acting rightly, in all of the ways that Aristotle identified (actions, thoughts, reasons, emotions, dispositions), I cannot find a way around such a heavy cognitive demand on the truly virtuous agent. This seems to stand even if much of the cognitive work is unconscious or lacking in conscious analysis, such as phronesis as a kind of instant moral perception.

VII. A Final Hurdle: Answering the Postscriptum to Lack of Character

Years after Lack of Character was published, Merritt, Doris, & Harman (2010: 371) now argue that “part of the explanation for experimentally observed moral dissociation is the subliminal inhibition or misdirection of subjects' other-oriented attention.” The idea of 'moral dissociation' refers to a “foul up” in the “transition [between existing values and norms] to a choice of action in line with [such values and norms]” (370). Moral dissociation is the process whereby one comes to experience the state of incongruency, i.e. the state of acting in a way that contravenes one's own values or principles. In essence, the situationist reboot again argues that people often fail to show a concord between their professed values and ideals and their outward actions, often due to subtle psychological oversights which may be just under our conscious
awareness. However, this attack relies less on the absence of character traits and more on an attack on notions of psychological reliability and consistency.

Merritt, Doris, & Harman's discussion of 'control' and 'automaticity'\textsuperscript{74} suggest that "many cognitive processes typically influencing behavior are substantially automatic. Particularly striking is the degree to which cognitive processes are resistant to introspective access, even when subjects are encouraged to reflect on the reasons for their behavior" (373). Merritt, Doris, & Harman remark that

The empirical evidence on automatic biases in social cognition suggests that, in many instances, behavior is influenced by cognitive processes that, if they were accessible to reflection, the actor would not endorse as acceptable reasons for action. This \textit{incongruency}, as we shall call it, involves a relation between (1) automatic processes likely to influence a subject's behavior on normatively significant occasions of action, and (2) normative commitments of the subject, such that (3) if the subject knew about (1), he or she would reject (1) in light of (2). Introspective awareness is, at best, only partially reliable and often misleading as a guide to the actual determinants of our behavior; as a consequence, introspective monitoring is unreliable as a way to ensure that our behavior remains under the control of our evaluative commitments (375, citing Kunda (1999)).\textsuperscript{75}

The explanation offered by these authors may be troublesome for AVE; it impacts Aristotelian \textit{phronesis} as practical wisdom, because it attacks the understanding of this

\textsuperscript{74} Merritt, Doris, & Harman (2010: 372) define \textbf{controlled} processes as "[making] intensive demands on limited cognitive resources […] requiring effort] and [open to disturbance] by a diversion or restriction of conscious attention. \textbf{Automatic} processes “make low demands on cognitive resources” and “are effortless, efficient, and capable of occurring in parallel with other (sometimes more controlled) processes.”

\textsuperscript{75} Though the mitigating ideas from Kunda (1999), in \textit{Social Cognition: Making Sense of People}, are omitted here. For instance, concerning the usefulness of counterfactual thoughts (which I take up in Chapter 5), Kunda states: “[t]hrough thinking about how misfortune might have been avoided, we may identify the causes and circumstances that led to the misfortune and be better prepared to deal with such circumstances in the future” (157-58). Suchlike ideas demonstrate, contra Merritt, Doris, & Harman (2010), that we may be more effective at isolating causes and determinants of behavior and events than originally thought. If so, then effective introspective awareness and monitoring may (with practice and focus) be within our grasp.
faculty as “the harmonious interrelation of reflective deliberation and habitual sensibilities.” Many times, phronesis requires “a swiftness of response” that “could be subserved only by the automatic aspects of cognitive processes.” Of course, “this is not the picture emerging from empirical work: a considerable gap separates this Aristotelean model of moral cognition from the type of model emerging in contemporary cognitive science” (375-76, all). This newer aspect of the situationist challenge, focused on practical wisdom, is a clear obstacle to my work, since I seek to reclaim phronesis and its pivotal role in AVE. [To do this, I shall argue that there are ways to cultivate a kind of automaticity that is in fact compatible with – and may even be endorsed by - AVE. However, I shall presently explore more of the newer situationist challenge to gain insight into their main commitments.]

Merritt, Doris, & Harman (2010) use one illustrative example to cement their point; they discuss a recent study which shows how the giving of gifts sponsored by a drug company are correlated to physicians prescribing more (and higher-cost) drugs to patients “with no justifying benefit” to those patients. Yet, the doctors more often than not will deny that such promotions and gifts had any impact on their prescribing behavior at all. Merritt, Doris, & Harman argue that “[h]owever readily individual physicians recognize the operation of self-interested bias in the prescribing behavior of their peers, they do not actually experience it in their own decision-making, so they sincerely deny its influences on their own actions” (377, all). This suggests that even diligent attempts at introspection typically will not reveal a problem in ourselves, only in
others: Dr. X is quick to criticize Dr. Y for something that he probably is guilty of as well, but Dr. X doesn't pick up on the relationship between his weekly Pfizer-backed lunch outings and his own record of prescriptions.

Merritt and her colleagues have argued that since introspection with the intention to modify behavior is often a failure, it is an unreliable antidote to moral dissociation and the resultant incongruence we experience. But, I take issue with the implication that because introspection often fails, it must be useless or completely ineffectual towards a change in one’s behavior. I think this is false. But, there are other concerns with the situationist argument here. The main problem is that there seems to be a lurking assumption that introspection cannot incorporate the feedback of others in any meaningful way. If a friend comments on my lack of generosity while leaving a tip, it should prompt me to think about that and try to examine other cases or patterns of that kind of behavior. So while I may not see which responses are automatic, or why I do certain things in a certain way, others can certainly provide fertile suggestions to help any introspection that I want to engage in. Friends, family, coworkers, etc. are valuable judges of character. While we may not always be the best judges of our own reasons and motivations – on this point, I agree with the situationists! - we are not alone in the quest for improvement and understanding. We rely on others to help understand and evaluate ourselves against whatever standard we have adopted for our own lifestyle, yet the situationist (ironically) ignores the wealth of social cues and feedback that we can, and should, seek out. Perhaps it is not a foolproof method of learning, but it demonstrates
that we are not in such cognitive and introspective poverty as Merritt, Doris, & Harman seem to believe.

Consider the doctor example once more. Dr. X may easily point the finger at Dr. Y for being influenced by a drug company's promotions, but fail to recognize his own incongruence. He either cannot identify the relationship between his own prescriptions and his acceptance of minor gifts, or he is unwilling (or unable) to acknowledge the relationship. And, he may even resist suggestions by colleagues so as to maintain his own self-image or perceived standing in his profession. Yet, it is possible that someone in Dr. X's life (his spouse, child, or even an esteemed mentor) may be able to get through to him and convince him of the truth of the situation. Indeed, the need to monitor and correct behavior is embedded in the professional world (hence medical ethics boards that would criticize Dr. X and Dr. Y!). The situationists make it seem as if scenarios of meaningful feedback are impossible, or at least highly unlikely – but how many times do we, in our own lives, seek and give advice about moral action? Aristotle (1999) even makes similar points about the corrective nature of good friendship in the Ethics; in Book VIII, he argues that “the young need friends to keep them from error. The old need friends to care for them and support the actions that fail because of weakness. And those in their prime need friends to do fine actions; for 'when two go together...', they are more capable of understanding and acting” (cf. 1155a10-20).

Nancy Sherman (1989: 30) helps to explain the Aristotelian stance thusly: “[t]hrough collaboration on projects and through listening to and identifying with the
viewpoints of others, an agent's vision becomes expanded and enlarged [...] The agent comes to learn different ways of reading a situation and different questions to pose in order to see the picture with increased insight and clarity. How to see becomes as much a matter of inquiry [...] as what to do” (emphasis mine). Combined with the idea of virtue-as-habit, and our understanding of phronesis, it is clear that such active dialogue and inquiry into one's own perception of situations and even one's methods for perceiving them can help to remedy many possible ills.

Another criticism of the situationist point is that automaticity is not necessarily all bad; it is only bad when it is representative of moral dissociation, and results in a blameworthy incongruence. In fact, it can serve us well, as when we are able to integrate certain goals so thoroughly into our lives that they become something of an automatic choice for us. This is clearly possible, e.g. cases wherein parents pursue the welfare of their children over their own, or where people are committed to certain ideals so deeply that acting in their service, albeit highly automatic, is nevertheless a praiseworthy thing to do. And, when we think of it, isn't this just what the virtues are meant to (eventually) be? The ideal for AVE is to have the right kind of traits, but these, for Aristotle, are hexeis. These are our soul's habitual 'holdings', and the picture of virtue that emerges is one that does not always require conscious effort. Indeed, when there is little time for deliberation and an agent still performs virtuously, we see a beneficial sort of automaticity at work. We possess, in the words of the psychologist, the correct kind of

chronically accessible moral schema. The concern is not so much that much of our social navigation takes place just under our consciousness, but that most people's navigation is flawed in some way. We have automatic biases, prejudices, blindspots, and can be very self-absorbed creatures if we do not actively try to correct such selfishness (either alone or with others we trust and esteem). Thus, forming the right kind of automaticity is crucial to virtue, and as a facet of moral education, it will be valuable to pursue in future work. It is just the kind of effort that can help to mitigate the situationist's worry about our moral reflexes, as it were.

Phronesis of fragility is not something that will just happen, though some people may be lucky enough to sense all of these important facts without much effort or specialized study. But, I envision this kind of prudence, the kind I feel Aristotle would endorse, as a very large ethical and cognitive commitment on the part of any agent, requiring effort and sustained practice. Both versions of the situationist challenge that are examined in this dissertation far from disprove or obviate AVE; rather, they only help to expose layers of analysis about how virtue itself works, and how we fallible humans can think and act as well as possible. Situationism only draws our attention to the specific ways that humans often fall into error; it is not a death sentence for AVE, but rather a point of departure for a much more informed approach to contemporary virtue ethics. Enough about the situationists, then. I have dealt with two situationist challenges, and AVE still comes out on top. I have also put forward several ideas about how we ought to understand practical wisdom in the light of the dialectic between AVE
and situationism. So, all that remains is to put the last piece of the argument in place.

In the next chapter (the final one of this project), I examine some thoughts about how *phronesis* may be tied to something called our moral imagination. Far from being mere amusement or entertainment, this kind of imagination is brought into service by allowing us to envision future situations as well as replay ones from our past; we can imagine all of the different outcomes, which helps us choose a course of action for tomorrow, especially if we can learn from past successes and failures. While this is not something taken up by Aristotle himself concerning *phronesis* as a kind of deliberation and decision, I feel that the two concepts marry quite well and that a discussion of moral imagination only helps to illustrate how practical wisdom operates, and how it can be improved by reflection and thoughtful meditation fueled by such imagination.
Chapter Five

You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.

- Mark Twain

Chapter Summary

So far, I have argued for the following claims:

(i) AVE remains a viable ethical position because the situationist challenge fails to refute it; *phronesis* is the key aspect of acting well in AVE, and we can develop critical points of theory relating to *phronesis* by assimilating the lessons of the situationist critique.

(ii) Such analysis reveals that Aristotelian practical wisdom is not just about rational deliberation, but also involves a kind of sensitivity to moral features of a situation. And, what is morally salient about a situation often involves details about our social heritage and our social embeddedness.

(iii) In order to attain the most knowledge we can about ourselves as socially-situated moral agents, we must utilize not only self-evaluation and monitoring, but we must also rely on the feedback of others whom we respect and admire.

Now, in this chapter, I will argue for my final main claim:

(iv) A key requirement for a fully developed *phronesis* after situationism – i.e. one that appreciates psychological fragility – is a well-developed moral imagination.

This chapter ties together the various threads of a *phronesis* after situationism that I have discussed in the dissertation as a whole, but especially as I have discussed in the last chapter. In a way, this is the most exploratory chapter insofar as it represents an
effort to demonstrate the substantial link between moral imagination and practical wisdom. This is a very fertile yet underrepresented area for philosophical research and investigation, though here I will only be sketching out some key ideas and offering my own thoughts on how moral imagination grounds *phronesis*. The main thought is that *phronesis*, as I see it, requires a well-functioning moral imagination in order to operate at peak capacity. Such an imagination is important to the subject of this dissertation not only because it generally aids in fine moral deliberation, but also because it can help to mitigate the social and situational pressures which so concerned the situationists.

I. The Aspects of Moral Imagination

It is important to understand how I will use the term 'moral imagination' in this chapter. As I understand it, the term 'moral imagination' (hereafter, MI) does not mean to imply that morality is simply a matter of caprice, whim, or mere preference. This is not the sense of imagination that I wish to argue for here; it is not “a subjective, free-flowing, creative process not governed by any rules or constrained by any rationally defined concepts” (Johnson 1993: 2). Indeed, such an understanding is too naïve of an interpretation of MI, and is perhaps based on the sometimes-negative connotation of imagination and its cognates. Instead, I will show that MI should be understood as a central cognitive fixture in our moral lives. I discern five related components, which I call the 'aspects' of MI, and each aspect is responsible for helping us to exercise practical wisdom in a certain domain of moral reasoning. I will treat each five briefly below, and then discuss them in more detail in the rest of the chapter.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. MI as Empathetic Engagement</td>
<td>The ability to take the point of view of another, and thereby make judgments that are sensitive to the well-being of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. MI as 'Acrobat'</td>
<td>The disposition to be able to find balances in the relationships between values, which can help bridge “either-or” moral thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. MI as Counterfactual Prediction</td>
<td>The ability to imaginatively predict the outcomes of various scenarios of action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. MI as Retrospective Insight</td>
<td>The ability to discern how past experiences bear on present (and future) decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. MI as Awareness of Complexity</td>
<td>The ability to imagine that one is influenced in ways that cannot be immediately introspected or sensed; a disposition to believe that actions do not issue solely from one's own will</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.1 – Aspects and Descriptions of Moral Imagination

II. MI as Empathetic Engagement

Tompkins (2009) argues that moral imagination is, at least in part, “the ability to recognize and consider ethical issues and topics from various points of view, including viewpoints that differ from those of the actor” (61). Thus, one concern of MI is the ability to consider alternative perspectives of a situation, especially a perspective of someone who is not the agent herself. Often, imagining such various points of view helps to uncover moral saliencies that otherwise would have remained hidden from the agent. And, in many cases, this can only be achieved when one attempts to understand what it would be like for another person to be the recipient of the agent's action. That is,
an agent may discover that a certain action would potentially offend (rather than aid) another person once the agent considers the action from this other person's point of view.

John and Mary are good friends, and have known each other for some time. But, lately, Mary has encountered some money problems due to unforeseen bills and charges. John, being a helpful friend, wants to help Mary by giving her some money towards her rent. He is ready to write out a check, but he hesitates because he suddenly imagines Mary's feelings of inadequacy and wounded pride that would result from her accepting his charity. In this case, John's moral imagination allows him to intuit a reason not to help Mary, or to find some other way to be supportive of his friend. John was able to empathetically engage with Mary, and imagine what she would feel like as the recipient of charity. As Tompkins suggests, such use of the imagination draws our considered attention to “the existence of Others whose interest to thrive would be affected by the actor's decisions and actions” (61). This attention is important, because it speaks to an agent's commitment to the value of human flourishing and thriving: John wants Mary to be happy and feel good about herself, and such a desire is laudable. Yet, it is this same desire that results in John not helping Mary in the way he originally thinks best. And, I contend that in situations like this, we see MI as empathetic engagement at work. 

One may ask whether or not MI as empathetic engagement requires a long or solid kind of friendship, as the kind posited for John and Mary. I argue that this is helpful but not required; indeed, we can easily think of empathetically engaging with strangers or mere acquaintances based on general, shared kinds of human feelings and experiences. I don’t need to be best friends with Kate to be happy for her when she gets promoted and buy her a small gift, but I do need to be able to understand why that kind of event is beneficial and deserving of my congratulations.
III. MI as Acrobat

Pretend that your quite honest friend tells you a story about finding a wallet in a parking lot of a grocery store. He tells you how he picked it up and brought it back into the store, and turned it in at the front counter. You ask your friend, “Didn't you want to keep it?” and he replies “What? No, that never crossed my mind.” In this case, the option of taking the wallet did not present itself during deliberation. As your friend considered what to do, he may have imagined certain outcomes based upon certain possible actions. Yet, he did not imagine, or recognize, the possibility of just taking someone else's wallet. We may want to say that your friend's honesty is reflected in just what he sees as his possible actions; he is an honest person because of what habitually appears as live options during deliberation.

To help further explain this, I rely on the idea of evaluative consistency. I will use a plus sign (+) to denote consistency with a value, and a negative sign (-) to denote inconsistency with a value. So, I suggest that your friend's deliberation admits of only +H reasons [consistent-with-honesty], and it excludes things that are -H [inconsistent-with-honesty] reasons. Taking someone else's lost property is typically -H behavior, and a reason like “I want this item despite its being owned by another” is of the -H class of reasons. Returning an item is typically +H behavior, and a reason like “I want to restore something accidentally lost” is of the +H class of reasons. Since your friend values honesty, he only can entertain deliberative scenarios involving +H reasons and behaviors.
when honesty is in question. He only seriously entertains +H reasons for action because those are the only ones admitted into his deliberation, and this is a large part of the explanation for his honest behavior.

I must pause here to consider an objection. At this point, one may be concerned that the above account may come off as heavily moralistic. That is, it may sound as if the only way to be considered a virtuous person is, by some miracle, to have a 'pure' deliberative field – one which is forever empty of -H reasons, let's say, or one that never seriously entertains -H kinds of actions even as a shameful fancy. Arguably, the vast (vast) majority of us would then be excluded from ever coming near to virtue, since we are all of us subject to the phenomenon of what psychologists call 'intrusive thoughts.' Such thoughts come to us unbidden and are often unwanted, since they usually regard vicious or unsavory things. For instance, while feeling irritated or angry, we often experience visualizations of a violent or offensive nature. These are obviously not to be taken as viable actions, nor even as reasons to act violently or offensively. We often ignore and dismiss them, but nevertheless they are an undeniable part of the human phenomenology. The same may hold for thoughts which are unbidden, but which we (perhaps shamefully) dwell upon for longer than we should like. We may daydream of ruining a coworker's life for his arrogance, or we might linger on a thought of an attractive stranger that we glimpse on the bus ride home. How do these kinds of thoughts relate to the deliberative field, moral imagination, and morality?

As it pertains to my argument, a critic may ask whether the person who
overcomes or ignores an intrusive thought (such as 'I should take this wallet') is really somehow worse than one who lacks such thoughts in the first place. The reply is a tricky one: if I suggest that only a 'cleansed' deliberative field is virtuous, then I am guilty of stuffy moralism, and of promoting what seems to be a very unimaginative moral life. I would be suggesting that the human condition of unbidden thoughts, daydreams, and fantasies were an ethical plague and that a good person would be purged of such temptations. Not only do I think that this is the wrong position to hold, but it also would be no better (at least as it concerns ethical self-esteem and self-confidence) than Maria Merritt's reliance on social sustenance of good behavior and John Doris' admonition to run away from situations which are the least bit worrisome. I criticized these positions for being too degrading or discouraging for a moral agent, and an insistence that one be saintlike (even in thought) seems equally disheartening for those who take moral action seriously. The ones who manage to purge their minds of bad thoughts are rare, and some may judge them to be close to the divine. There is, admittedly, an attraction to the idea of such ethical purity. But, in the end, such people only manage to purge themselves of their characteristically human desires. A person who does not want things he should not have has either transcended the human condition, or somehow remarkably exists outside of it. Similarly, a person who is not even intermittently bothered by unbidden thoughts of darker substance seems outside of our experience.

So - what should I make of a case where a generally good person finds a wallet on the ground and is greeted by mental flashes of theft, robbery, petty larceny, and
dishonesty? I know I need to turn the wallet in, but even as I start towards the door to do my duty, the slideshow of knavery keeps playing on. Through no conscious fault of my own, I encounter a slew of -H thoughts and desires. Is my deliberative record tainted forever?

The answer is “No”, and the reply goes as follows. I may have desires of taking the wallet and making off with the contents, or dabbling in identity theft, or dozens of other actions which do not involve immediate surrender of the wallet in question. Yet, without the endorsement that such desires are permissible, they remain outside of real deliberation; they exist not as live options, but remain flights of fancy. They are best understood as a species of intrusive thought, yet they do not count against my virtue because my deliberative field consists only of live options which are consistent with my commitment to honesty. Even though I am bombarded by -H thoughts, they do not emerge as -H reasons because reasons – properly speaking – must be things that I endorse, and are consistent with my values. So, such thoughts need not count against even a well-functioning phronesis because phronesis (in this context) is only concerned with what are presented as live options. I need not purge myself of all negative desires or urges in order to act well, but I do need to make sure they never appear as live options in my deliberation – I can never endorse such inconsistent desires.

Now – I still need to explain why an 'acrobat' function is tied up with MI. Why is finding a kind of moral balance an 'imaginative' process? This may be seen more easily if we think about someone who lacks imagination when it comes to balancing reasons.
Consider Freya, who can only conceive of +H and -H ways to see the world. An act is either honest, or it is dishonest. Freya is committed to +H actions because they align with her endorsement of the value of honesty as a human practice, and how it contributes to human well-being and flourishing. But, this sometimes gets Freya into trouble with others because +H behavior, while typically laudable, sometimes conflicts with other requirements for well-being like compassion. Freya may be compassionate only until such a reason is overridden by demands of honesty. So, when Torvald asks her if she likes his new painting, Freya responds by saying 'No, it's rather hideous.' The compassionate (+C) thing to do would come at the expense of the honest (+H) thing to do, which is something Freya cannot even consider. Her commitment to honesty runs that deep, but obviously she may lose affection from her friends with such extremism. There seems to be no appreciation for nuance or balance in Freya's deliberation; she fails to see a reason to be compassionate, for Torvald's sake, because she jumps at the chance to be honest. So, because Freya cannot identify a way to balance the reason to be honest and the reason to be compassionate, she comes off as morally unimaginative.

Conversely, pretend that another friend, Rikke, tells Torvald that she 'really likes the brush strokes in this section' and then asks him to explain more about the piece because she 'doesn't quite understand what his inspiration was.' Rikke finds a way to be compassionate by praising something in the painting, but finds a way to also be honest about her feelings towards Torvald's painting. What Rikke displays – and what Freya does not – is evidence of creative moral thought. Rikke finds a novel way of responding,
and is able to discern an inclusive disjunction: I can be +H, or +C, or maybe both. But, Freya can only discern an exclusive disjunction: I can be +H, or +C, but not both at the same time. Rikke is more able to display creative moral thought; as such, she displays a finely-tuned MI (as acrobat) because she possesses a more robust understanding of her desires *qua* reasons. She sees that one can be both honest and compassionate; it’s just a matter of finding the appropriate way to do it.

**IV. MI as Counterfactual Prediction**

*Phronesis* is concerned with deliberation, and as such there exists a strong relationship between it and MI. One metaphor for this relationship is based on the traditional ranks of a guild; a strong MI is the hallmark of the master deliberator, in contrast to the apprentice or journeyman deliberator (who possess lesser skills or practice in using MI). In fact, Elizabeth Pask (1997) argues that moral imagination “is a necessary forerunner to the practical wisdom of the 'expert practitioner’ as opposed to [merely] the 'experienced practitioner” (208). Deliberating finely requires understanding of certain means-end relationships, but also requires a strong MI to ensure that ethically significant features of situations are not left unexplored. This is apparent when we use MI to predict what may happen should we perform action A, B, C, etc. but can also be seen when we utilize MI to review past experiences with a critical eye. I say more about each of these below in turn.

To start with, I look at MI as counterfactual prediction. MI is present in
deliberation when we conceive of, and evaluate, potential actions. John Kekes (1993) calls this the 'exploratory' side of moral imagination because it requires a creative faculty to envision the execution of a hypothetical action and then guess at its consequences. When John thinks about what to do (i.e. whether or not to write Mary a rent check), he may try to envision what results are most likely from his action. Let's say that he imagines two scenarios: he either gives Mary the check, or he doesn't. If he does not give her the check, he rightly predicts that her money problems will not be alleviated. But, if he does give her the check, she may gain another month's rent at the cost of her pride and self-confidence. Neither of these cases is optimal, since John still wants to help his friend. But, he only sees this when he explores what might happen were he to act in some way or other. And, it may turn out that such rehearsals prompt John to see a third way, one in which he can help Mary without imposing his charity (by encouraging her to take a second job, or making wiser investments, perhaps). In any case, this kind of example allows us to understand how MI operates in its aspect of counterfactual prediction.

V. MI as Retrospective Insight

Aside from the forward-looking aspect of MI as counterfactual prediction, there exists a backward-looking aspect of MI as retrospective insight. This involves assessing past experience and analyzing it for important clues about how to act better in the

78 The role of empathetic engagement is not absent from this example, but I do not bring it up here because the mental rehearsal – John's predictions when he runs through his options – are the important features of this aspect of MI.
future, including in the moral dimension. Sometimes, we review past experience and morally salient features come to our attention that were not there before. Or, we find new moral significance in something we took to be morally important previously. Our imaginations can help us to improve in this way due to what Kekes (1993) calls the 'corrective' feature of moral imagination. In contrast to just helping us choose a right action, our imaginations can provide us with material for reflection which in turn is able to enlarge the inhabitants of our deliberative field. Kekes (2006: 21) remarks, “[m]oral imagination directed backward is needed, then, to guard against making mistakes in the present.”

Consider the imaginary case of Agrippina, a participant in the original Milgram experiments. A month after her participation, Agrippina still reminisces about her role in the 'shocking' of subjects at the experimenter's behest with bafflement and regret. She sees all too clearly her willingness – and the willingness of many others – to obey perceived authority figures without much questioning or hesitation. This bothers her, because each replaying of the experiment brings more and more shame at her actions. She is able, in a large part due to her remembering a past psychological struggle, to commit herself more earnestly to being critical of authority and to refuse any 'orders' which seem suspicious or harmful. She uncovers new moral significance in the role of authority, in her own typical responses, and has a new appreciation for the moral threat that human suffering poses in life. Agrippina, we might say, has gained retrospective insight by using her moral imagination to analyze her past experience.
Now, though, one might raise an objection: what makes this an act of MI as retrospective insight rather than just an instance of memory? Why assume that this is a creative, rather than mnemonic, episode? The best response is that memory can only bring forward what happened in a set duration of time. Agrippina did this, felt this, and so on. It is, certainly, the foundation of MI as retrospective insight. But memory cannot explain why Agrippina finds new moral saliencies with each replaying of the event, or why Agrippina now uses her feeling of shame as a spur to self-analysis. Memory can only tell Agrippina that she did this, and felt that, but not what she ought to do and feel in light of that experience. MI (as retrospective insight) can help us discern new patterns of normativity and new demands of morality, which memory itself cannot do. Mark Johnson (1993) quotes Oliver Williams’ poignant remark that a strong moral imagination, as a tributary to the river of practical wisdom, can help us to ‘astutely recognize obligation and wrongdoing”’ (62). This ability can be found in both the exploratory and corrective sides of imagination, each of which aid in the development and deployment of phronesis by the fine deliberator. However, it may be that such recognition is most often the product of using MI to gain retrospective analysis of our past so that we act better in the future.

VI. MI as Awareness of Complexity

The situationists have argued – and I have agreed with them – that subtle, situational pressures can wreak havoc upon our moral deliberation and behavior. This
may be all that we agree on, but it is perhaps the most important for sketching a post-
situationist AVE. In this section, I address the specific role of moral imagination in
helping to mitigate and compensate for such pressures. I call this aspect of MI the
awareness of complexity, meaning an awareness that an agent may be subject to
behavioral influences and biases that are not easily sensed or introspected. It is a kind of
openness to the possibility that our typical understanding of 'my actions are my own' is
too simplistic a view of action and behavior.

As we learned from Doris and Harman, situational pressures are surprisingly
powerful and often undetectable. One contention is that having a strong moral
imagination allows for better identification of such kinds of pressures, and helps one
decide upon an action that may compensate for this kind of pressure. MI may help one
envision (or at least acknowledge the possibility of) factors in the environment that may
be bearing on behavior. As Williams suggested, imagination helps us to recognize
obligation as well as wrongdoing; with practice, why should it not be able to offer insight
into the more subtle places where obligation and wrongdoing might dwell?

To demonstrate, it is useful to recall a few examples from previous chapters. For
instance, we can recall the situation of Dr. X (who receives promotions from drug
companies, but denies that they impact his prescriptions). Dr. X is unwilling or unable to
recognize that his accepting inducements from drug companies is biasing his
prescriptions, and thus he cannot possibly hope to mitigate the effect of such
inducements on his actions. Yet, he is quick to point out how easily other people
succumb to these promotions, but the recognition and acknowledgment ends there. He cannot see outside of his own behavior, and cannot step into the role of another person (a colleague, family member, etc.) who might find fault with the way that he is acting. In short, he cannot assume the role of another who might see his inconsistency. The explanation used by Merritt, Doris, & Harman (2010: 377) is that such physicians “don't experience [their faults] in their own decision-making,” and thus are unaware of just how the pressures are exerted upon them.

We can ask what the role of MI is in the above example, but it is much easier to understand how MI relates to the awareness of the complexities of action if we examine a case of its absence. So, the question now is, 'What is it about Dr. X and people like him that strike us as morally unimaginative?' We can plausibly attribute to Dr. X's a belief like “good, smart people cannot do bad, dumb things.” Knowing that he, himself, is a good and smart person, Dr. X reasons that he could never do bad, dumb things such as being swayed or biased in the exercise of his medical duties. But, Dr. X must believe that his colleagues are all bad, or dumb, or both if they allow their professional actions to be determined by gifts and favors. Dr. X cannot imagine the case of a good, smart person who does a bad, dumb thing just because Dr. X has an unsophisticated view of morality and action. This lack of ability to appreciate, or allow for, psychological and behavioral complexity is what makes Dr. X wrong about his colleagues as well as so frustratingly unaware of his own biased decisions. In the Dr. X case, the lack of MI manifests itself in a disturbing parochialism. Dr. X cannot go outside of himself (i.e. consider his own actions
from anything approximating an objective point of view) to see that he – a good, smart man – is subject to the same pressures as his fellow doctors and is making similarly unethical decisions. He cannot imagine that this possibility exists, nor can he imagine the ethical worth of thinking 'outside of the box' about himself and his own behavior.

This is why I describe this aspect of MI, when it is present, as allowing an agent to be aware of the complexities involved in human behavior and judgment. This is especially true when it comes to the barely-sensible kinds of pressures that exist in our lives which can easily throw us off. Situationism teaches us that subtle environmental factors can strongly influence our ethical behavior, but I want to argue that a strong MI may help an agent identify and mitigate at least some of these factors. I cannot claim that MI will allow agents to identify a lawnmower buzzing in the distance (and be able to compensate for its annoying noise, so that they do not insult their spouse in a disagreement). But, I think it reasonable to say that cultivating MI (as awareness of complexity) may be helpful to agents in situations like figuring out that they are easily distracted when they are hungry. Or, that they are more prone to be disagreeable and irritable after the Giants lose a game on Sunday afternoon. Or, that they tend to get overly anxious when thinking about certain family members, which bears on how they are (e.g.) driving to work at the moment. These are the kinds of ethically innocuous events that can have appreciable impacts on our ethical behavior, which (I take it) is the kind of thing that situationism is so worried about.

If it is the case that MI as awareness of complexity can aid us here, then I
conclude that this aspect of MI offers some hope against the psychological fragility that I have identified as a lesson from Doris and Harman's challenge to AVE. This aspect of MI allows one to analyze behavior's sometimes subtle, but sometimes overt, link to psychology and situation. It can help us to sense patterns and relationships in our feelings, thoughts, and actions which can lead to ethical growth and understanding. A useful analogy here may be the expert archer. We said before that he can identify certain variables, like wind speed and direction, which could impact his aim. So, he adjusts accordingly. The archer requires a certain amount of imagination in order to do this successfully, though. If the breeze is coming out of the south, he must be able to understand and, in a sense, visualize what this would do to his missile in flight. Once this is grasped, he can change things like his grip, his aim, and even the tension on the bowstring to make sure the arrow has a good chance at hitting the target. Dr. X – the person who lacks MI – is like an archer who is so confident in his training that he fails to even think about the wind; he cannot even sense that it is blowing.

VII. Relationships and Interdependencies Of the Aspects of MI

Before turning to my concluding remarks for this chapter (and, really, for the entire work) I felt that it was appropriate to show how the aspects of MI are linked in a few substantial ways. This helps to bring out the interdependence that is sensible from my explanations and examples in the preceding sections. No aspect of MI stands by itself, and a well-functioning MI requires development of all of the aspects to some
Here, then, is a representative chart of the major relationships and interdependencies of the aspects of MI. This is by no means exhaustive, but only shows the most salient relationships.

| MI as Empathetic Engagement and MI as Awareness of Complexity | The ability to step outside oneself is required for being aware of the complexity of one's own actions. But, it is also required in order to empathetically engage with another person, in order to imagine how you would feel *if you were them* in the situation. |
| MI as Counterfactual Prediction and MI as Retrospective Insight | These two are linked in a cyclical kind of way. MI as CP is inherently forward looking, while MI as RI is inherently backward looking. But, oftentimes we make a decision by using prediction, and examine that decision using retrospection to see if it was appropriate. In those cases, each aspect of MI is involved with the same action or outcome, albeit from different perspectives. |
| MI as Acrobat, and MI as Counterfactual Prediction, and MI as Retrospective Insight | Making predictions involves utilizing the deliberative field and the live options within it. Improvements in the deliberative field (i.e. finding new reasons to act, or finding variation within action) can open up new predictive possibilities. Subsequently, this may furnish MI as RI with new material for analysis. |
| MI as Empathetic Engagement, and MI as Acrobat | In many cases, our reasons to act are based on the feelings of another (and their resulting well-being). So, our deliberative fields are populated by guiding reasons like 'This would hurt Lucy's feelings' and 'This would make Linus very happy'. Sometimes we have to balance the well-being of many people, though. |

**Table 5.2 – Relationships Between the Aspects of MI**
VIII. Concluding Remarks about the Aspects of MI

Strong moral imaginations lend themselves to a certain way of framing or seeing situations, isolating morally important factors, and deciding upon an appropriate action. It provides a kind of openness to understanding our own moral fragility, something that AVE and situationism both understand as part of the human condition. It helps us to come up with new ways either to avoid this fragility, or else to compensate for the things that are likely to make us fragile. Moral imagination also helps us to grow as ethical beings, in the sense that moral thought is inherently creative. It takes a creative mind to recognize that being virtuous is hard! One must acknowledge that there is no set algorithm for deciding and acting which can be applied to all situations, and that there is no fixed method of inquiry when we ask 'What ought I to do here?' or 'How might I have acted differently?' Thinking about alternative actions is a creative process, insofar as one has to consider the ways that the future might be like. It is not altogether different from when an artist sketches out several poses for an arm or a leg before deciding on the most appropriate one. Creative and imaginative moral thought helps to see these obstacles and yet also to overcome them by breaking through various constraints on thinking and deciding.

In the specific context of this dissertation, I am interested in how MI might be used to combat the psychological frailty that is evidenced by the situationist experimental record. Crucially, I suggested that MI as awareness of complexity may be
one of the best faculties for mitigating at least some of our psychological fragility. But, there is room to object. Do I mean to say that all of the moral lapses evinced by the situationist experimental record are simply instances of weak moral imaginations? No; I do not wish to commit myself to such an extreme view of things. To clarify, all I am committing to is that the expansion and strengthening of the moral imagination (insofar as it underlies *phronesis*) holds great promise for the possibility of gaining moral insight about the fragility of our characters. Nor is this knowledge to be thought of as a panacea for all of the situationist's worries; if I come to find out that I get temperamental when it is cloudy out, and this impacts how I treat others, such a realization is no guarantee that I'll be able to compensate for such a variable. This may take a short time, or a long time – but, the *hope* is that eventually, such an acknowledgment will find its way into my deliberation. I can then take facts like 'it is cloudy out' to be morally significant, whereas before such a fact would have lacked any salience whatsoever.

Another consideration is that virtue is a matter of degrees. This is an Aristotelian point which bears repeating. Frans Svensson (2008) argues for a *developmental model* of virtue, wherein an action still is right if it is what a virtuous person would do, but wherein we are allowed to adjust for the gradations of virtue within each person. On such an account, “right behavior involves different things for different people” (139). The person closer to virtue is laden down with many more cognitive and affective requirements than, say, the person who is just learning to make substantial moral choices for the first time. For the beginner, the cognitive and affective demands of the
expert “are neither expected nor required” (139). A beginner cannot be held to the same standard, as it were, as the expert. Following this model, AVE cannot be said to violate the 'ought implies can' rule, since developmental virtue “does not require us to live in a way that is not accessible to us, given our specific levels of development in virtue” (139, emphasis mine).\(^7\) This seems like an appropriate reading of the classical Aristotelian position, wherein virtue comes in degrees (cf. Pask's remark about what separates the 'expert' practitioner from the 'merely experienced' one). It is implausible to think that one imaginative recognition will allow a person to become an expert deliberator, or even a few such recognitions. But, the claim is that expert deliberation – true phronesis – cannot occur without a substantial record of such recognitions.

**IX. Final Conclusions**

In Steven Fesmire's (2003) work, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination*, he quotes Martha Nussbaum on the nature of acting morally. Since the 'moral drama' is not prescribed, moral actors must be ready to respond to life's situations on an improvisational basis. Nussbaum says that we must be 'prepared to see and respond to any new features that the scene brings forward [... instead of seeing a situation as] simply as the scene for the application of antecedent rules” (112). Moral deliberation, the exercise of practical wisdom, is inherently creative and imaginative due to the variety of experiences. We

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\(^7\) Some objectors to AVE argue that since it may be seen to violate this rule in the form of “you should do what the virtuous person does”, it is not a practical or viable theory. By following the ought-implies-can rule in the form of degrees of virtue experience, this depiction of virtue as a learning process avoids these kinds of criticism.
must be 'responsively alive and committed to the other actors' if we are to have a chance at seeing ourselves and others flourish. Such a way of seeing and interacting, aside from being our most likely route to a good life, also encourages a person to be morally inquisitive about herself and others. Such inquiry, fueled by a strong moral imagination, presents opportunities for us to explore the complicated and nuanced ways in which we typically respond to situations (as well as the ways in which the process breaks down). There is no guaranteed way to combat the fragility of character which situationism has demonstrated to us, but developing a strong moral imagination will hold the most promise for understanding *phronesis* after situationism.

In this work, I have argued that the situationist challenge from Doris and Harman does not successfully argue against the possibility of character traits. The individual arguments which comprise the challenge fall short in different ways, but in the end AVE is left as a viable ethical theory since its central assumption about character is left standing. This is not to say that the situationist challenge is without merit or usefulness to enthusiasts of Aristotelian ethics. Rather, the opposite is the case: situationism has shown us important details about the psychological *fragility* of human character traits, even if it hasn't proven the psychological *fragmentation* that it set out to prove. I argue here that the point about fragility must be appreciated by those doing serious work in the tradition of character-based virtue ethics, since it illuminates our moral psychologies and may help us improve upon methods of moral education in several spheres. Moreover, analyzing such fragility helps us to understand practical wisdom in a new way;
I have delegated new tasks to *phronesis* thanks to a post-situationist analysis of the concept, and thanks to the explicit link between practical wisdom and moral imagination. I can only hope that further work is undertaken in this area by moral philosophers and social psychologists in the future.
Bibliography


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