Aristotelian Virtue Theory:
After the Person-Situation Debate

DANIEL C. RUSSELL

Social psychologists tell us that the empirical evidence for the existence of behavioral dispositions is very poor, and several philosophical psychologists have taken this to mean that there is little empirical evidence for the existence of virtues, especially as Aristotle thought of them.¹ By contrast, I think just the reverse is true: the evidence from social psychology is, if anything, very good news for a theory of the virtues like Aristotle’s. In addition to a negative thesis about behavioral dispositions, the evidence from social psychology also suggests a positive view of personality and character, and the basic points of this positive view are ones that Aristotle himself fully embraced. If that is correct, then it is time to move beyond recent philosophical debates about the merits of social psychology and Aristotelian virtue theory as allegedly rival ways of understanding human behavior.

I begin by distinguishing the two broad approaches to personality in the social- and personality-psychological literature that are at the centre of this debate (§1), and I outline a positive approach to personality that is favored by many social psychologists (§2). I then show that such an account is actually friendly to Aristotelian virtue theory (§3), and end with a couple of caveats about the scope of Aristotle’s theory (§4).

1. Two approaches to personality: dispositionism and situationism

Psychologists agree that behavior is a function of features both of the subject who behaves and of the situation in which the subject behaves (see Lewin 1951). And indeed we usually suppose that personality differences account for different behaviors in the same situation, on the one hand, and on the other we generally make allowances for unusual behavior in unusual situations. Furthermore, psychologists agree that whatever personality is, it must be both stable and consistent. That is, personality must be something stable in producing similar behaviors in similar situations over time: for example, persons who act

¹. E.g. Doris 2002 is very typical in this respect.
dishonestly in one kind of context display stability if they tend to act similarly in such contexts at later times as well. And personality must be consistent in producing similar behaviors even in different sorts of situations, so that, for instance, persons who act dishonestly in one kind of context can be said to be consistent if they tend to act dishonestly in other contexts too.

However, here the agreement ends, because here we face a question that is as controversial as it is crucial: just when are behaviors and situations “the same”? Take a simple example. Suppose that Fred is walking through an empty room, sees a coin lying on a table, and leaves it there. Now suppose that George walks through the same empty room, but pockets the coin. Did Fred and George behave in opposite ways? Were they in the same situation? These questions are crucial because the very assessment of stability and consistency rests upon a classification of behaviors and situations: these are all the same, and they are different from all of those. Clearly, such classifications will vary greatly depending on how situations and behaviors are classified, and it is at this crucial point that personality theories divide.

One very natural supposition to make about our example is that deliberately pocketing the coin is the opposite of deliberately leaving it alone, and that finding a coin in an empty room is just one situation. That, after all, is probably how things will seem to us observers. On this assumption, we observers hold situations as fixed, like the “scenery” against which the “actors” behave. We might then classify Fred’s behavior as stereotypically honest and George’s behavior as stereotypically dishonest. This very straightforward approach is the basis of the so-called dispositionist approach to personality, and it was the dominant approach in personality psychology for most of the 20th century. On this view, behavior is the observable manifestation of the subject’s dispositions as they play out against a wide range of fixed backgrounds, and only minimally suggests any interaction with that background on the subject’s part (see Mischel 1968, 281 for discussion). Dispositionism takes the basic units of personality to be so-called “broad-based dispositions,” that is, dispositions that are both stable and consistent from the observer’s point of view. If Fred has a broad-based disposition to behave honestly, then we should expect to find his behaviors similar over time in situations we take to be similar (stability)—for instance, not pocketing money found in that room on other occasions—as well as in other situations we find relevant to honesty even

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2. By calling dispositionism an “approach” to personality, I mean that it is a broad view of the basic elements of personality—a sort of periodic table, if you like—and not a specific theory of the nature of personality.
though dissimilar in other details (consistency), such as not pocketing money found in other places, either, as well as not cheating on tests, and so on.

However, it is the alleged cross-situational consistency of broad-based dispositions that has been the main point of controversy. For instance, in their ground-breaking study of honest behavior in children, Hugh Hartshorne and M. A. May (1928) found that while observed honesty in a child in one context was a good predictor of that child’s behaviors in that context over time, it was a much poorer predictor of behavior in different sorts of contexts in which the researchers judged honesty to be relevant. This study prompted numerous later researchers to focus more closely on behavioral consistency, for which the evidence continued to be poor, and in particular on the more precise role of situational variables as factors in behavior.

For example, John Darley and Daniel Batson’s well known “Good Samaritan” experiment examined subjects’ likelihood to stop and help a person obviously in urgent need as they were going from one appointment to another. On the dispositionist picture, this setup should be seen as constructing a single situation in which to observe different behaviors: the scene is defined by the presence of someone clearly in need of help, and one either helps or not; and the differences in behaviors should be down to differences in personality dispositions. However, what Darley and Batson found was something very different: in their study, the subjects’ likelihood to help the person in need depended primarily on how hurried they were when they came across that person, rather than on other personality differences or even their views on the parable of the Good Samaritan. In other words, the differences in behaviors seemed to have less to do with the particular dispositions of the “actors” than with situational variables that were supposed to have faded into the background “scenery.” Similarly, Stanley Milgram found through a series of obedience experiments that whether subjects were more or less likely to comply with directives to administer what they believed were painful, even harmful electric shocks to others depended mainly on certain situational variables of the experiment itself, such as whether the scientist giving directions was in the room or communicating by telephone. Once again, the experimental evidence suggested that somehow those variables were influencing behavior in a way that traditional dispositionist models had not been ready to predict.

Now, one reaction to such experimental findings is to say, “So much for consistency”—and consequently, so much for the very idea of personality; a

3. Darley and Batson 1973; see Campbell 1999, 39 for discussion.
very drastic reaction indeed. But among psychologists the much more measured reaction has been to rethink how we classify behaviors and situations as the same or different. What these experiments seem to put beyond question is that since behavior is very sensitive to situational variables, it is unwise for observers to hold situations fixed as mere background scenery. Return to our earlier example. Suppose that Fred left the coin alone because he thought, “Someone lost that—it’s someone else’s property”; that is, Fred saw the situation as an opportunity for stealing, and he saw his behavior as not stealing. By contrast, perhaps George pocketed the coin because he thought, “Someone lost that—bad luck, but finders, keepers”; George saw himself as having a minor stroke of luck, like finding a coin on the pavement, where stealing really had nothing to do with it. If we focus on how subjects process situations and how that processing influences behavior, then we have to conclude that the situation may not be the same and the behaviors not really “opposites” after all.

Moreover—and this is the crucial point—such differences between Fred and George suggest that we may learn far more about their personalities by understanding how each classifies situations and behaviors than by replacing their classifications with our own (see Ross and Nisbett 1991, 13). That is, the really important difference between people might be their differences in how they process the situations they are in and adjust their behaviors to situations so processed. So an alternative approach would try to arrive at a classification of behaviors in terms of the meanings that subjects attach to them, including the subjects’ own perceptions of their situation. After all, an observer’s classifications of a subject’s situation and behavior should say something about the observer’s point of view, but there is no reason to expect it to show anything at all about the subject’s personality (see Mischel 1968, chap. 3). This way of thinking about situations, behaviors, and personality is the basis of situationism as a research framework in social psychology. This approach starts from the idea that situational variables are crucial for predicting behavior and understanding personality. Indeed, on this view the sharp person-situation distinction that characterized the dispositionist approach simply breaks down.

For the situationist, situations are important explanatory factors in behavior, and the causal link is the fact that subjects “construe” their situations and attach meaning to them, and adjust their behaviors to situations so construed. For instance, situationists might argue that in the Darley and Batson experiment,

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5. Situationism in social psychology is to be distinguished from “situationism” in philosophical psychology, to which I will turn in §2.2.
hurried subjects were more likely to construe the test scenario in terms of their being late for an appointment—it presented an unwanted opportunity to keep others waiting—whereas less hurried subjects tended to construe it as an opportunity to help. Likewise, the variations in rates of compliance in the Milgram experiments, it is argued, stemmed from the fact that different versions of the test scenario presented different levels of difficulty for subjects to arrive at their own determinate construal of their situation in the first place. For instance, horrified subjects may have found it more difficult to construe the situation in terms of their horror when receiving face-to-face cues from a nonchalant scientist than equally horrified subjects who interacted with the scientist only by phone (see Ross and Nisbett 1991).

Simply put, whereas the dispositionist sees a situation mainly as the “scenery” against which the subject acts, the situationist sees subject and situation as intimately interacting via the mechanism of construal. (It might have been more apt if situationism had instead been called “construalism.”) Consequently, whereas dispositionism treats personality as a complex of dispositions to act that are elicited by situations taken as fixed, situationism treats personality as a complex of patterns of interpreting situations and adjusting behavior in accordance with those interpretations. For situationism, to be stable is to behave in ways similarly construed in situations similarly construed with respect to that behavior; to be consistent is to behave in such ways despite other sorts of objective situational dissimilarities. Simply put, stability and consistency are really features of complex psychological patterns of interpreting and adjusting, and not of behaviors as observers interpret them.7

Already, then, we can see that such an approach to the relation between personality and situations leads rather naturally to a depiction of personality as a set of cognitive and affective modes of construing and adjusting to one’s surroundings.8 That brings us to situationism’s positive claims about the nature of personality.

7. In technical parlance, dispositionists maintain that the consistency of a personality trait must hold across different situations that are all characterized “nominally” (i.e., by the observer) as trait-relevant, whereas situationists hold that personality traits must be consistent across situations characterized “psychologically” (i.e., from the subject’s perspective) as trait-relevant (see Mischel and Shoda 1995; Shoda 1999; Mischel, Shoda, and Mendoza-Denton 2002, 51; see also Lord 1982).

8. It is important to note that construal need not be either a conscious or a deliberate process.
2. Social psychology, personality theory, and the virtues

2.1. Situationism and personality theory

Even if dispositionism has been discredited as an approach to personality theory, it does not follow that any positive situationist alternative benefits by default—there are, after all, more alternatives to dispositionism than just that. And in general, whether the situationist approach to personality is correct or not is a question for another time. At present, I want to clarify what that approach is and (in the next section) why it is friendly to Aristotle’s view of the virtues. At the very least, focusing on the situationist approach affords me the argumentative advantage of drawing on the very body of research that critics in philosophy have argued discredits traditional views of the virtues, especially Aristotle’s.

Situationism suggests a positive model of personality that has been developed over several decades, most notably by Walter Mischel and his colleagues. Mischel’s 1968 book *Personality and Assessment* is a landmark in the development of social psychology and a devastating critique of dispositionism; indeed, it was really with that book that something recognizable as situationism began to take shape. For Mischel, the basic units in the taxonomy of personality are certain cognitive and affective processes by which subjects interact with their environment. These processes include the construction of situations and roles, categorizing persons and events, drawing inferences about the intentions of others, expecting certain kinds of outcomes from actions and events, attaching value to certain kinds of outcomes, adjusting behavior so as to bring about certain outcomes, and possessing such “executive” skills as delaying gratification, controlling impulses, and making and executing plans over time (see Mischel 1973, 265-76). On this account, differences in personality consist largely in the different goals and priorities we have, how we conceive of ourselves and others, the meanings we attach to different situations, our various executive skills, and the features of situations to which we are particularly attuned. The unique whole that is the sum of all of these diverse parts and their interrelations with each other is personality (see Ross and Nisbett 1991, 164-7).

What evidence is there that personality, so understood, is consistent rather than fragmented? Mischel argues that to find coherent psychological patterns, we must first identify behavioral patterns. Inevitably, this means that scientists are once again in the position of observers of subjects’ behaviors; however, instead

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9. I thank Rachana Kamtekar for urging this point on me, one that I did not make sufficiently clear in my 2009 book.
of taking an ex-ante classification of behaviors and situations as given, the aim here is to work from observations of behaviors to testable hypotheses about how such classifications are being made by subjects. For example, suppose that we observe a waiter serving different customers and discover that when he is serving a lone older woman (say), he is solicitous; when he is serving a family with small children, he is playful and homey; and so on.¹⁰ Now, if in traditional dispositionist fashion we held these situations constant and asked (say) whether the waiter is solicitous, then the answer would differ depending on who happened to be dining in the restaurant when we observe him. If most of his customers were lone older women, then we would observe solicitous behaviors most of the time—perhaps well above average; his non-solicitous behaviors towards other customers would get “averaged out” as statistical noise, and we would conclude that he is, indeed, mostly solicitous. But of course, what this example reveals is that the dispositionist approach treats as noise the very information that is the signal: information about when the waiter is solicitous and when he is not (see Mischel and Shoda 1995, 247-8). Once construal is factored into behavior, though, we might conclude that what the waiter is really doing consistently is reading and responding to situations so as to increase his tips.

Mischel describes such observational exercises as collecting “if-then signatures,” that is, correlations between behaviors and situational stimuli, such as adopting a certain demeanor when waiting on a certain type of customer.¹¹ It is important to note that an if-then signature is not itself a personality attribute (pace Doris 2002, 77, 85)—in which case it would of course be a rather fragmentary attribute—but is instead behavioral evidence for consistent personality attributes (e.g. Mischel and Shoda 1995, 258). For example, Mischel and his colleague Jack Wright (1987) investigated whether if-then signatures in children at a camp for troubled children might indicate that their aggressive behaviors stemmed from frustration in situations that put high demand on coping skills. To find out, workers at the camp who had come to know the children well were asked to characterize camp-life situations according to levels of such demandingness. Although the children’s behaviors varied widely across the different situations, the variability could be predicted with some success on the basis of differences in demandingness from one situation to the next. This suggests that if a subject’s aggression correlates with situations that are too demanding for him, then we can hypothesize that his lack of coping skills leads to frustration

¹⁰ The example is from Ross and Nisbett 1991, 164, discussing Cialdini 1988.
¹¹ See Mischel 1968, 183-4, 189; Mischel and Shoda 1995, 258; Kammrath, Mendoza-Denton, and Mischel 2005; see also Mischel 1973, 278.
and that frustration to aggression—and that hypothesis, if correct, would be a significant piece of information about the subject’s personality. So, again, although this process begins with observers hypothesizing about behaviors and situations—it could not begin anywhere else—the goal is to build up a picture of how subject and situation interact, so as to understand situations and behaviors as they are construed by the subject.

Once behavioral patterns are established in this fashion, we can begin to construct a picture of those aspects of the subject’s personality that underlie the behavioral patterns. Mischel’s approach thus shifts our focus from broad-based dispositions to complex cognitive and affective patterns, and from situation-free subjects to complex interactions between situations on the one hand and cognitions and behaviors on the other (Mischel 1973, 265). From this perspective, we are able to understand simultaneously the consistency of the subject’s personality and the diversity of the subject’s behavior in what seems to us a wide array of situations (Mischel and Shoda 1995, 2). The situationist’s positive thesis, then, is that personality is understood in terms of the subject’s interaction with situational variables according to cognitive and affective patterns that are both stable and consistent (see Ross and Nisbett 1991, 167). Simply put, we understand personality not by drawing inferences from stereotypical behaviors but by drawing back the curtain as far as we can on the subject’s patterns of practical thought and reasoning.12

2.2. Implications for virtue theory

Philosophers have responded to situationism in very different ways when it comes to virtue theory. The most drastic response has been to conclude that situationism forces us to give up the very idea of character traits. Such an idea rests on a dispositionist model of personality, the worry goes, but since that model has been empirically debunked, theorizing about virtues and vices is moot, like describing the contents of an empty box.13 For instance, Gilbert Harman holds that there is no evidence for the existence of character at all,14 while John Doris argues that there is evidence at most for character traits that are very specific.

12. For a closer discussion of Mischel’s work in this area, see Snow 2010, chap. 1.
13. For a useful discussion of this reaction, see Flanagan 2009 and Prinz 2009, 125.
14. Harman 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, and 2005. However, more recently Harman (2009, 241) has taken a much softer line: “I do not think that social psychology demonstrates there are no character traits, either as ordinarily conceived or as required for one or another version of virtue ethics. But I do think that results in social psychology undermine one’s confidence that it is obvious there are such traits.”
to situations but lack any cross-situational consistency. However, this drastic response is actually undermined by situationism because, ironically, such a response assumes that cross-situational consistency would have to be more or less what dispositionists say it is, namely consistency from the observer’s point of view. But situationism is not only a negative thesis about the dispositionist view of consistency, but also a positive thesis about an alternative view of consistency based in construal. What is more, even though the evidence may be poor for cross-situational consistency of a dispositionist sort, there is simply no reason to think that the very idea of virtues and vices must presuppose cross-situational consistency of that sort. On the contrary, I argue in the next section that Aristotle’s own thinking about consistency is far closer to the situationist alternative than to anything like the Hartshorne and May-era dispositionist view.

At the same time, many philosophers have questioned many of the apparent experimental findings in social psychology. For example, we might worry that putting subjects in a dilemma, as in the Good Samaritan experiment, between helping those who are counting on one to be on time, on the one hand, and helping a needy person one encounters along the way, on the other, is a poor way to test the consistency of helpful behavior. Likewise, some have argued that even if helping the needy person is what benevolence really demanded in the experiment, the conclusion should not be that the very idea of a virtue of benevolence has been debunked but only that that virtue is rare, which is no great surprise anyway.

These concerns are worth considering, but for now I want to set them aside. Instead, I want to take a different tack and argue that situationism as a positive approach to personality is fully consistent with the existence of virtues and vices, especially as Aristotle thought of them. Although much of the philo-

19. I discuss questions like these in Russell 2009, chap. 9.
sophical literature has focused on situationism mainly as a negative project, several philosophers have also noticed its positive significance for personality theory. As Owen Flanagan has noted, the key observation in situationism is the importance of construal and goal-formulation in characterizing the consistency of personality (1991, 280-1, 291). And several virtue theorists have argued that such a view of personality also suggests a way of thinking about the virtues. For instance, Gopal Sreenivasan has observed that virtues are, first and foremost, forms of responsiveness to reasons, so that behaviors and situations must be understood from the perspective of the subject’s reasons for acting, a perspective that is in focus in construal-laden conceptions of personality. Likewise, Nancy Snow (2010) has devoted a recent book to grounding a theory of the virtues in psychological research on social intelligence. And I have argued elsewhere that virtue theory not only can withstand the situationist critique of dispositionism, but can positively embrace the situationist approach to personality. My aim in the rest of this paper is to extend the same point to Aristotle’s theory of the virtues in particular.

3. Personality theory, virtue theory, and Aristotle

There is little question but that Aristotle believes that there are such things as personality and character, and that they are causes of action. After all, it is because Aristotle believes that virtues are causes of actions that he makes them central to well-being, which depends primarily on what one does. Furthermore, Aristotle believes that virtues are stable, describing them as “firm and unchanging” states. And, crucially, Aristotle believes that virtues are consistent causes of good actions across a wide range of situations, such as in fortunate as well as unfortunate circumstances (see NE I.10, esp. 1100b12-22, 30-5). Aristotle accounts for this consistency by noting, one, that to have a virtue is to have certain kinds of goals, and two, that the virtues all involve practical intelligence or phronesis, and it is phronesis that enables the virtuous person to

22. See also Kristjánsson 2008. My argument shall focus on Aristotle’s general account of the psychology of character. Other issues include Aristotle’s belief that to have any virtue is to have every virtue (see NE VI.12-13), and his belief that to be practically wise at all means being practically wise in all areas of life generally (see NE VI.5); see Badhwar 1996 and 2009 for critique. I have discussed these issues elsewhere (Russell 2009, chap. 11) and shall not say more about them here.
23. NE I.5, 1095b26-1096a2; I.7, 1098a7-18; I.9, 1099b25-6; I.10, 1100b8-11.
24. NE II.4, 1105a32-3. Aristotle calls the virtues “hexeis” (II.5, 1106a10-12), which he characterizes as stable and long-lasting (Categories 8, 8b25-9a13).
determine what course of action would be most appropriate in one situation or another with respect to such goals.25

The question, then, is whether Aristotle understands consistency in terms of the observer’s perspective or the subject’s construal.26 I argue, first, that Aristotle believes that we can understand the inner states from which a subject acts only if we understand how the subject construes the situations in which he acts. Second, Aristotle believes that we will understand a subject’s actions in a way that reveals his personality only if we understand the inner states from which he acts. And third, Aristotle accepts what follows, namely that we will understand a subject’s actions in a way that reveals his personality only if we understand how he construes the situations in which he acts. It is that conclusion, of course, that situationists like Mischel and others also have drawn on the basis of their empirical research.

3.1. Inner states and construal of situations

Aristotle makes it clear in his account of the emotions that we must understand a subject’s construal of a situation in order to understand the inner states from which he acts. In the second book of the Rhetoric, Aristotle says that in order to understand how emotions influence actions, we must analyze emotions into their three main components: in the case of anger, for example, “we must say [1] what state men are in when they are angry, [2] with what people they are accustomed to be angry and [3] in what circumstances” (see Rhet. II.1, 1378a19-29).27 The first of these components is affective: every emotion is a kind of pleasure, pain, or desire, or a combination of these.28

The other two components are cognitive, and these are especially important for our purposes. One of these is one’s beliefs about the persons concerned. For instance, one does not tend to become angry if ordered about by someone that one takes to have the authority to order one about, but may well become angry

25. VI.13, 1144b10-17; VI.1, 1138b18-34; VI.5, 1140a24-31; VI.12, 1144a24-31; see also EE II; Webber 2006, 206.
26. Unfortunately, Aristotle’s critics have often overlooked this crucial point, and this has tended to obscure the discussion. For instance, Doris notes that Aristotle thinks of the virtues as both stable and consistent, and without further ado assumes that Aristotle’s theory is therefore a clear example of dispositionist psychology (see esp. Doris 1998, 506-7 and 2002, 15 and chap. 2). (See also Doris 2002, 17-18 for discussion of many of the Aristotelian texts cited above.) For that matter, Harman simply assumes that Aristotle’s psychological model is a dispositionist one without discussion. Such assumptions are reckless.
28. II.1, 1378a20-23; II.2, 1378a30-32. For emotions that seem to combine these states, see e.g. II.2, 1378a30, 1378b1-10.
if ordered about by someone one regards as lacking such authority (*Rhet.* II.2, 1378b26–1379a7; 1379b4–6, 10–12). Likewise, one’s anger over a supposed insult may subside if one comes to believe that the insult had not been so intended (II.3, 1380a9–14). The same case also illustrates the other cognitive component, namely one’s beliefs about the circumstances concerned: one may become angry if one believes one is in a situation of having been insulted by someone, and anger may subside if that belief changes. Likewise, one’s anger over an apparent insult may vary depending on who else one believes may have witnessed the insult, such as people by whom one wants to be admired (II.2, 1379b23–7). More generally, Aristotle says that anger usually subsides when one’s appraisal of a situation changes, either by ceasing to believe that there ever really was a “score” to be settled (so to speak) in the first place or by coming to believe that the score has in fact been settled somehow.29

Because of these two cognitive components of emotion, a situation must be characterized from the subject’s perspective in order for us to understand the emotions on which he acts in that situation. Hence on Aristotle’s view, the subject’s situation is part of the explanation of the subject’s affective state, and for that reason we must understand that situation as the subject himself understands it. In other words, an adequate understanding of the subject’s affective state must refer to the subject’s construal of the situation: on Aristotle’s view it makes no difference whether we observers think that a subject has been insulted (say), only whether the subject himself thinks so. It is clear, therefore, that Aristotle believes that a proper explanation of a subject’s emotional states requires information about how the subject construes his situation.

3.2. Inner states and the characterization of actions

It is equally clear that Aristotle believes that we must understand a subject’s inner states in order to understand his actions. More precisely, Aristotle holds that, for purposes of understanding a person’s personality or character, we must characterize the person’s actions by reference to the inner states that cause them—that is, we must characterize the actions from the subject’s perspective rather than from our own. This thought permeates the *Nicomachean Ethics*; I shall mention just a few of the most notable ways in which it occurs there.

We can begin by considering anger again, in particular, Aristotle’s discussion of virtues and vices with respect to anger. Interestingly, as Aristotle describes

29. For the former: II.3, 1380a9–14, 33–1380b1, 16–20. For the latter: II.3, 1380a14–28, 1380b13–15, 20–30; see also 1380b31–4.
these virtues and vices, it is clear that there may be little difference between them in terms of overt behaviors from the observer’s perspective. Consider an example. Suppose Fred believes that George has just insulted him, and Fred slowly turns and walks away rather than striking back. What has Fred just done, and how should we say he has reacted? For Aristotle, we cannot tell unless we find out more about Fred’s inner states. If Fred turned and walked away seething and planning retaliation, then Aristotle would characterize his act as bitter or grudging. If Fred turned and walked away because he lacked the spirit or “nerve” to do anything else, then Aristotle would characterize his act as docile or “wimpy.” If Fred turned and walked away because he judged it better to overlook the insult, then Aristotle would characterize his act as patient or even-tempered. And so on. Clearly, Aristotle insists on important differences between acts that all look the same to an observer but differ with respect to the inner states of the subject. Moreover, that differentiation is ethically significant, since in the first two cases (the grudging case and the wimpy case) Fred’s act would count as vicious on Aristotle’s view, but in the third case (the patient case) it would be a virtuous act. So we cannot always tell who is acting virtuously just by looking. Where anger is concerned, then, Aristotle clearly thinks that actions must be characterized from the subject’s side, not the observer’s, if we are to understand what those actions might have to do with either the subject’s personality or his moral character.

These observations about actions involving anger will generalize, since for Aristotle all the virtues generally are concerned with both action and emotion (NE II.3, 1104b13-16). For example, courage concerns the emotions of fear and confidence (III.6, 1115a6-9), and while Aristotle says that the central cases of courage are those on the battlefield (1115a24-35), this is not because courage is a disposition to do stereotypically “courageous” or “brave” things, as observers might think of them. Rather, battlefield cases are the central cases of courage for Aristotle because he regards them as central cases of facing great dangers for the sake of a worthy cause (1115a29-31). Indeed, that is why Aristotle insists that many people who do stereotypically “courageous” things—hired

30. NE IV.5, 1126a19-26, 1126a3-8, 1125b31-1126a3.
31. See Kristjánsson 2008, 67-76 for an excellent discussion of this point.
32. Moreover, while it is true that for Aristotle a person is even-tempered or hot-headed because of what he does, Aristotle makes it clear that in the case of anger “what one does” in the first instance just is to construe situations in a certain way—as a serious assault on one’s good name, say, rather than as something that ultimately matters very little. In other words, the “behavior” that really reveals character with respect to anger is the very behavior of construing situations. Again, therefore, where anger is concerned, for Aristotle many actions must be characterized psychologically, because those actions just are what goes on in one’s psyche.
mercenaries, for instance, or soldiers who are intimidated by their superiors (III.8, 1116a29-1116b23)—are not really courageous in the sense that concerns him. So here too actions may look the same to an observer who just sees several soldiers all rushing into the fray, but which of these actions count as courageous or not depends on the inner states of the subjects. Likewise, these inner states involve construal, in particular the construal of situations in terms of one’s goal of defending a good cause, in the case of courageous actions, rather than the goal of avoiding embarrassment or punishment, say (III.7, 1115b20-24, 1116a11-15). Once again, then, for purposes of understanding how actions reveal character and personality, on Aristotle’s view those actions must be characterized in terms of the subject’s construal rather than from the observer’s point of view.

The same conclusion holds even in the case of virtues like generosity, which (unlike even-temperedness and courage) does not concern any specific type of emotion. For Aristotle, generosity is not defined in terms of stereotypically “generous” behaviors, such as giving things away. Here again an observer may find little difference between an action that is generous and one that is not. This is because it is not the person who gives away much or often who acts generously, but the person who gives cheerfully and with right practical reasoning, giving the right amount to the right people for the right reasons and at the right time (NE IV.1, 1120a23-1120b4). As Aristotle points out, there may be few observable differences between generous actions and profligate or wasteful actions, since in both cases we may observe rather copious giving (1120b4-6). But Aristotle insists on differentiating these actions in terms of the inner states that produce them: why one gives, in what spirit one gives, how intelligently one gives, and so on. Here too, for the purpose of understanding character and personality, Aristotle focuses on what transpires within the subject as he acts in one way or another.

The same point is clear also from the difference between virtuous and continent or self-controlled actions, namely that virtuous actions are done with pleasure (NE II.3, 1104b3-13). Aristotle does not mean, absurdly, that virtuous actions must always feel good or be fun, but rather that such actions must be done without internal impediments such as boredom or wishing to do otherwise (see III.9, 1117b16; VII.12-13). To act virtuously, then, requires not only acting from choice, but also having one’s feelings in agreement with that choice. In this way, virtuous persons are importantly unlike continent persons who act from choice, even from a choice of “the right thing,” but must fight their feelings in order to stick to their choice (III.2, 1111b14-15; VII.2, 1146a9-16; VII.9, 1151b32-1152a3). This means that there will often be no observable difference between a virtuous action and a merely continent action. Nonetheless, the differ-
ence between these actions is of great concern to Aristotle for the purposes of understanding how actions relate to character, and the difference between them is in the subject, not the observer.

Our examples so far have shown that, for Aristotle, an action’s being stereotypical of a certain character trait is not a sufficient condition for that action’s being attributable to such a trait in fact: docile actions, bitter actions, reckless actions, profligate actions, and self-controlled or “continent” actions are all importantly different from virtuous actions, and yet may be indistinguishable from them from the observer’s perspective. Moreover, Aristotle also believes that an act’s being stereotypical of a trait is not a necessary condition of its being attributable to that trait, either. For instance, acting in a manifestly “angry” way is not stereotypical of even-temperedness, but Aristotle says that such acts can nonetheless be even-tempered provided that the anger is appropriate to the circumstances (NE IV.5, 1125b31-1126a8, 1126b4-9). Likewise, backing down from a fight is not stereotypical of courage, but such an act could be courageous if it is the wiser thing to do (III.7, 1115b21-33). Likewise for generosity: even if Fred gives more money and more often than George does, it may nonetheless be George’s actions, rather than Fred’s, that count as genuinely generous in Aristotle’s sense, if for instance it is George who acts with the proper spirit of generosity (IV.1, 1120b7-11). Similarly, since acting virtuously involves exercising practical intelligence to ascertain what action would be most appropriate in the case at hand, in our example George, who gives less, and less often, actually may count as more generous than Fred if it is George who better understands when, how much, and to whom it is appropriate to give. In fact, from this it follows that improvement in the virtue of generosity over time may even be paired with giving to others much less frequently than before (see Russell 2009, 348-55). And in general, given the importance for Aristotle of practical intelligence in fitting actions to situations, it would be extraordinary to suppose that a virtuous action must also be one that strikes chance observers as stereotypical of some virtue (cp. VI.13, 1144b1-17).

Significantly, therefore, Aristotle offers classifications of actions that often will be just the opposite of the most likely classifications from the observer’s perspective. And this is exactly what we should expect to find in Aristotle’s discussion of the particular virtues of character, since a focus on the subject’s perspective is also central to his general account of virtue. In NE II.4, Aristotle makes an important distinction between virtuous actions and the products of

34. II.6, 1106b-1107a2; VI.1, 1138b18-34; VI.12, 1144a6-9.
productive skills: whereas we only need to inspect the product itself, and not also its maker, in order to determine its quality, nonetheless in order to characterize an action as virtuous we also need to know whether the subject knows what he is doing, why the subject is doing it, and whether it is typical of the subject to do so (1105a26-b9). In other words, Aristotle holds that character is unlike skill insofar as the observer’s point of view is adequate to tell what kind of product has been made but inadequate to tell what kind of action has been done. Rather, we need to know rather a lot about how a subject understands his own actions before we can even say what those actions are, if we mean to take actions as providing any sort of clue about character.

Likewise, in NE II.6 Aristotle says that virtues are states of character that lie in a “mean” between ways of going wrong at different extremes (characterized generically as forms of “excess” and “deficiency”), and he distinguishes two senses of the mean (1106a26-b7). One is what he calls “the mean in respect of the thing itself,” which is simply the point equidistant between two extremes; and the other sort of mean he calls “the mean relative to us,” by which he means that which is appropriate to the particular circumstances. Aristotle says that virtues lie in a mean of this second kind: to have a virtue is to act and feel in the way one should—at the right times, about the right things, with respect to the right persons, and for the right reasons (1106b18-24). This is most significant for our purposes. If virtues lie instead in the mean of the first kind, then having a virtue would be a matter of being disposed to perform certain externally describable actions with at least such-and-such frequency. For instance, generosity so understood would lie in giving about this much to about this many people about this often, between what is “too much” and “too little.” As it is, however, Aristotle believes that while virtues achieve the mean in action, this is not a matter of performing certain stereotypical behaviors with stereotypical frequency but of adjusting one’s actions and reactions to one’s surroundings in intelligent and appropriate ways. For Aristotle, actions are salient to character only as characterized from the subject’s perspective, not the observer’s.

3.3. Action, construal, and consistency

So far we have seen that Aristotle holds (one) that we must understand how a subject construes situations in order to understand the inner states from which he acts, and (two) that we must understand those inner states in order to understand what his actions are, for the purpose of understanding his character. From these two theses it follows that we must understand construal in order to understand action in a way that is revealing of character, and it should be clear already that
Aristotle accepts this crucial conclusion as well. We have seen repeatedly that the inner states that differentiate between actions for Aristotle are primarily those by which persons construe situations and adjust their actions to them. For instance, Aristotle believes that an act cannot be characterized as patient or docile, courageous or mercenary, generous or profligate, or in general virtuous or otherwise, without understanding how the subject construes what he does: what goals he takes his action to serve, the values he attaches to certain events and outcomes, how the situation bears on things that he cares about, and so on. Likewise, for Aristotle we must also consider how the subject deliberates about what to do, as this too reveals how he takes his action to fit within his broader goals. In a word, Aristotle clearly believes that characterizations of actions depend crucially on how subjects construe actions and the situations in which they act.

Therefore, although Aristotle believes in the consistency of personality and character, it is clear that for Aristotle the consistency of character ultimately comes down to the consistency of patterns of construal and practical reasoning. In other words, on Aristotle’s view the dispositionist model of consistency is entirely the wrong model. Rather, Aristotle understands consistency in the very sort of way that situationists like Mischel and other social psychologists argue is empirically respectable.

Of course, to say that there are such things as virtues is to make both a descriptive claim and a normative claim: it is to say not only that there are stable personality traits, but also that such traits can be excellences of character. On this latter point, Aristotle holds that a virtue consists in patterns of construal and practical reasoning by which one consistently acts for reasons that are good reasons. A person with the virtue of generosity, for instance, must be consistent not with respect to whatever standard he happens to have but with respect to a correct and appropriate standard—as Aristotle puts it, virtue aims at a mean that is in accordance with correct practical reasoning (NE II.6, 1106b36-1107a2; VI.1; VI.13, 1144b21-28). A generous person is one who gives to others not merely in situations that he thinks call for generosity, but in situations that really do. Generosity is a character trait in virtue of which one regularly acts for the sake of certain goals (e.g. the goal of materially benefiting others for their own sake), attends to certain features of situations as practically salient, classifies situations as opportunities to help (rather than e.g. to ignore or to exploit), attaches value to certain kinds of outcomes, and so on, and adjusts one’s behaviors accordingly.  

35 See also Butler 1998, who reviews such forms of practical reasoning in the work of David Wiggins and John McDowell and extends them to a theory of character traits.
Such a character trait can be temporally **stable**, since the adoption of goals and reasons for acting tends to be stable. Such a character trait can be **consistent**, since—as we saw in the case of the waiter—acting for certain reasons or goals can underwrite a wide range of behaviors in a wide range of situations. And crucially, such a character trait can also be an **excellence**, since it is a bundle of cognitive and affective processes in virtue of which one is both cognitively and affectively responsive to reasons that can be endorsed from within an adequate ethical outlook.

So Aristotle understands behavioral consistency from the subject’s point of view, and he understands one’s consistent pattern of construing and reasoning—in a word, one’s “character trait”—to be a virtue just in case one’s own standard of consistency where that trait is concerned is also an ethically good one, in virtue of which one acts for good reasons. Whether or not a trait counts as a virtue, on Aristotle’s view, depends not only on the consistency of construal patterns but also on their quality.

This way of thinking about the virtues, then, is entirely consistent with the findings of social psychology. And I would argue that it is also entirely plausible to understand the virtues as excellences of feeling and practical reasoning, as Aristotle does.36 Crucially, Aristotle rejects the idea that a person can have a virtue only if his actions seem stereotypically virtuous to other people—people who may not know the reasons for which he does what he does or would not appreciate his reasons even if they did know them. As we have seen, Aristotle maintains that actions that look stereotypically generous (say) may not be generous actions after all, and that actions that do not look stereotypically generous to an observer may be generous nonetheless. Simply put, to act consistently for a certain goal and construe situations in terms of that goal, is to have a personality trait; and to act consistently for a certain **good** goal and construe situations appropriately in terms of that goal, is to have a virtue.

### 4. Some caveats

I have argued that Aristotle thinks about personality and consistency in much the same way that psychologists like Mischel and others do, but that is not to say that Aristotle has anything like a developed theory of the nature of personality

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36. *Pace* Doris (1998, 509-11; 2002, 78-85), who argues that even if Mischel and others were right about subject’s-eye-view standards of consistency for the *descriptive* purposes of the social psychologist, Doris argues, those standards still would be of no help at all for the *normative* purposes of virtue theory. See also Alfano 2013, 78-9.
in the modern sense. For instance, unlike Mischel and Wright (1987) Aristotle offers no methodology for formulating hypotheses about a subject’s personality on the basis of observations of his behavior, which is of course a main point of contention between dispositionists and situationists. Rather, all we have seen is that Aristotle, like Mischel and others, thinks of personality or character in terms of stable and consistent cognitive-affective mechanisms for interpreting situations and adjusting behavior. Beyond that general level of description, there are several important respects in which Aristotle’s approach is not just different in focus and detail but in fact much cruder than modern accounts of personality, and I want to close this paper by pointing out two such respects.

First, I suspect that Aristotle has far less understanding of the precise mechanisms of construal than we find in modern personality theories. As we have seen, Aristotle says that inner states like anger depend on how one construes one’s circumstances and the behaviors of others, and in particular he seems to focus on what an angry person believes about such things. That is to say, Aristotle’s focus is on types of construal of which the subject would seem to be consciously aware. By contrast, modern notions of construal are much broader, including not only beliefs but other sorts of cognitive and affective states of which the subject need not be aware. For instance, two people may behave very differently at a party if, say, one of them expects that getting up and dancing will lead others to follow suit, whereas the other expects such behavior to lead to awkwardness and embarrassment. But by “expectations” here we need not mean beliefs that the two party-goers know full well that they have about dancing at parties; on the contrary, modern thinkers are very used to the idea that cognitive and affective states can shape behavior while remaining below conscious awareness. Take another example: in studies of anorexic women, brain activity has been observed to differ significantly depending on whether the women view their own photos or photos of other women. Even if we resist the suggestion that these studies provide physiological evidence for differing construal patterns, such resistance is unlikely to stem from the fact that the women concerned are unaware of what they are doing. So the first caveat I want to offer is that although Aristotle thinks of character or personality in terms of how we interpret situations and adjust

37. Here I have benefited from Rachana Kamtekar’s comments on my 2009 book during an Author-Meets-Critics session at the 2011 Central Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association.
38. The example comes from Ross and Nisbett 1991.
behaviors, it is not clear that his thinking was very sophisticated about the mechanisms by which we do so. Or, to put it another way, Aristotle seems to focus on explicating what a person with a given character trait can do, rather than on precisely how that person manages to do it.  

This first caveat leads to a second one: if our inner responses to situational variables shape our behavior but bypass conscious awareness, then at best we might say that virtuous behavior is up to us in a far more complicated sense than Aristotle appreciated. For instance, there is no reason to think that we could explain Darley and Batson’s findings by saying that they worked with a peculiarly awful set of subjects, and there is even less reason to think this in the case of the Milgram experiments, since subsequent variations on the experiment with very different subject groups yielded little difference in results. But if the problem is not that the subject groups included a lot of awful people, then the problem would seem to be that even people who are not awful can become confused or distracted by situational variables in subtle and surprising ways—and indeed in ways that bypass their conscious awareness.

There is a cautionary tale here, but further caution is needed in saying exactly what it is. Some have concluded from this surprising evidence that virtue theory is doomed after all: since subjects are so easily thrown off the track, it is unlikely that anyone could be as reliable in action as virtuous persons must be; so there must not be much point to the very idea of virtuous persons (e.g. Vranas 2005). Notice an underlying assumption: virtue theory is an exercise in beginning with a philosophical ideal of unfaltering reliability, and then positing the “virtues” as the psychological traits by which we—somehow, apparently miraculously—realize that ideal. Put another way, we start with an ideal to aspire to and think of the development of the virtues as how we get there from here. But since there seems to be no way for creatures like us to get there at all, thinking of moral development in terms of virtues is just a waste of time.

Virtue theory could be a very different sort of exercise, though: we could instead start with such facts as that we are all too easily thrown off track, and then investigate how people manage to improve. In particular, we might think about the virtues in this way by thinking of them in the way that we think about

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40. I do not intend this as an objection to Aristotle’s theory. I simply point out that Aristotle offers what some psychologists call a “product theory”—a theory of what a given trait does—rather than a “process theory,” that is, a theory of the fine-grained mechanisms by which the trait does what it does. For the contrast, see e.g. Vicente and Wang 1998; for further discussion of this contrast in Aristotle’s virtue theory, see Russell forthcoming, §4.

41. Here I have benefited from Emily Fletcher’s comments on an earlier version of this paper. See also Badhwar 2009, 268-9; Alfano 2013, 43-50.
ordinary skills. Knowing how to play a musical instrument, build a table, or write in a new language is difficult; in these areas it is success rather than failure—staying on track rather than being thrown off—that calls for explanation. That is where the development of skill has to begin, with what it takes for creatures with our abilities and limitations to do better where doing well is the exception—and we might say exactly the same about virtues of character.42

What is more, even though it has become common to assume that Aristotle takes the former, “top-down” approach to the virtues,43 in fact his approach seems instead to be of the latter, “bottom-up” variety.44 Although Aristotle denies that virtues are themselves skills (see §3.2, above), nonetheless when he opens his treatise on the nature of virtue in NE II, he begins with the observation that virtues are things we have to work to acquire, and in particular that virtues, just like skills, must be acquired through repeated and guided practice (II.1-2). For Aristotle, acquiring a virtue, like acquiring a skill, is a matter of improving at extracting information from one’s circumstances so as to do better at determining what would count as realizing one’s goal in one’s circumstances—what would count as building well, here and now, in the case of skill, and what would count as giving generously, in the case of virtue (see VI.5, 10-11). Put simply, Aristotle is interested in the virtues because he is interested in how people get better, both in character and in intellect, given the shortcomings from which they have to start. Aristotle thinks of becoming virtuous as a special case of something people do all the time: getting better in action through practice and training.

It is a mistake, then, to assume that virtue theory concerns itself with some pure concept of virtue that is already laid down before we even begin to reflect on it. Rather, virtue theory can start—and I would argue, Aristotle’s virtue theory does start—with the prospect of improving on where we actually find ourselves. On a top-down approach to the virtues, discovering new ways in which we are thrown off track can be devastating, as it suggests that there may be no way for us to get from here to our ideal after all. By contrast, on a bottom-up approach such discoveries are constructive, telling us more about where we actually begin and how we need to improve.

However, that said, what social psychology suggests about where we begin is that the things that throw us off track are often beyond our conscious awareness. That is not to say that we cannot learn to do better—after all, it seems undeni-

42. See Annas 2011.
43. See e.g. Doris 2002, 17.
44. I argue for this way of understanding Aristotle’s virtue theory in Russell forthcoming.
able that things beyond conscious awareness throw people off the track in the case of skills too, and yet people do manage to acquire skills. But one of the chief ways that people acquire a skill is by developing automatic routines that enable the scarce resources of conscious attention to be focused elsewhere. However, Aristotle himself has very little to say about subconscious processes at all, as we have already seen, and what is more, he seems to have no clear view about automaticity, either. In that case, the real cautionary tale—and my second caveat—is that getting better with respect to the virtues turns out to be challenging in ways that Aristotle himself would have found surprising and unexpected. Milgram’s findings, for instance, surprised everyone, and I think they would have surprised Aristotle, too. Those findings do not suggest that we cannot become virtuous, starting where we do, but they certainly do give us startling information about where we do in fact start—information that would have been news to Aristotle as much as to anyone else.

Conclusion

It is time to move past the person-situation debate, which has generated much heat in the philosophical psychology literature but not nearly as much light. Given the current state of the empirical evidence from social psychology, a viable virtue theory could be constructed by starting with a cognitive-affective taxonomy of personality, of just the sort that situationist social psychology suggests. Furthermore, such a theory can be normatively as well as empirically adequate, holding that such cognitive-affective repertoires are those by which one acts for the right sorts of reasons, pursues the right sorts of goals, attaches the right sorts of values to outcomes, and in general, those that constitute forms of emotional and deliberative excellence. And indeed, that is how Aristotle understood the virtues in the first place, over two millennia ago. Therefore,

45. See e.g. Bargh 1989, 10-27; Hogarth 2001, 139-41, 190-3; Narvaez and Lapsley 2005, 144-8; Kahneman 2011, chap. 22.
46. Aristotle seems committed to an inconsistent triad: (1) that to do something “immediately” is not to do it from choice (NE III.2, 1111b9-10), since choice involves deliberation (1112a15-17) and deliberation takes time (III.3, 112b20-24); (2) that a courageous act can arise immediately from that virtuous disposition without preparation (III.8, 1117a17-22); and (3) that virtues just are dispositions to choose (II.6, 1106b36). See Cooper 1986, 5-6; McDowell 1998, 107; Russell 2009, 11-13 and forthcoming, §6.
not only can Aristotelian virtue theory withstand the situationist’s empirical findings, but in fact it seems to have been positively vindicated by them.48

University of Arizona
University of Melbourne

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