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Situationism, Attachment and Public Policy

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If policy-focused discussions of character should ever take time out to examine their philosophical underpinnings, at some point they surely need to engage with situationism. For situationists – most notably John Doris – have argued that cross-situationally stable character traits like honesty and courage, which have been a leading focus for philosophers at least since Aristotle, either don't exist at all or (less radically) are too rare to do any interesting explanatory work.¹ But if that's correct, it poses a challenge to any policy initiative which aims to address social problems by fostering or inculcating character traits: mustn't any such initiative be doomed to failure? This paper is an attempt to respond to the challenge by arguing that even if situationists are right about a particular class of cross-situationally stable character traits – let's call them 'Aristotelian' character-traits – policy-makers should not be too worried about it.

The response begins not, indeed, at the beginning but somewhere near the end: there's good evidence that some policy initiatives that aim to inculcate what have at least been *described* as 'character-traits' have been a success.² And it would be a surprise if they had not been, since these initiatives have themselves drawn strength from empirical studies that have taken character – whether as cause or as outcome - as one of their leading concepts.³

But supposing this evidence can't be quarrelled with – and it is not philosophy's place to do so even if it can - it nonetheless falls to theoreticians to explain how things can be that way. The basic thought I offer here is that the traits relevant to explaining the success of

¹ See most recently M. Merritt, J. Doris and G. Harman, 'Character', in *The Moral Psychology Handbook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 355-401.

² See for example Graham Allen MP and Rt. Hon. Iain Duncan Smith MP, *Early Intervention: Good Parents, Great Kids, Better Citizens* (London: Centre for Social Justice & The Smith Institute, 2008), esp. chs. 3, 4; 'Social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) programme in secondary schools: national evaluation', at www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-RR049, cf. also J. Durlack et al., 'The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning', *Child Development* 82 (2010), pp. 474-501.

³ For character as cause, see J. Lexmond and R. Reeves, *Building Character* (London: Demos, 2009), p. 26, citing e.g. J. Margo et al., *Freedom's Orphans* (London, ippr, 2006); K. Duckworth, *Self-regulated learning: a literature review* (London: Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, 2009), cited by Jean Gross, 'Should character be taught?', in J. Lexmond and M. Grist (eds.), *The Character Inquiry* (London: Demos, 2010), p. 92. For character as outcome, see James Arthur, *Of Good Character* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010), p. 114, on teachers' role in forming character; Lexmond and Reeves, op. cit., esp. ch. 3, for parenting styles as predictors of 'agency, application and self-regulation' in 5 year-olds.

character-focused policy initiatives, or the character-focused outcome studies on which they are based, are either more specific or more general than Aristotelian virtues.

To turn first, then, to the first alternative, even if 'Aristotelian' traits such as honesty or courage are not cross-situationally stable, it does not follow that the same holds true of more fine-grained traits such as honesty-to-colleagues or honesty-to-lovers, or courage-in-the-classroom and courage-on-the-battlefield. Anecdotally it appears all too easy to possess one member of these pairs without possessing the other, but by the same token – to reverse the pessimistic spin on that way of putting it – the fact that someone may lack physical courage shouldn't debar us from describing him as courageous in the classroom, if that is his home turf. Indeed this patchy picture is just what we might expect given the familiar phenomenon of human imperfection: as one of Iris Murdoch's characters says,

No one is good all through ... As virtuous agents we specialize, we have to, because vice is natural and virtue is not.⁴

Anecdote aside, something like 'specialization' – that is, cross-situational stability of more finely-grained, situation-specific traits - also emerges from empirical research. In a study based in a therapeutic residential camp for children with behavioural problems, Walter Mischel and colleagues found both that individuals' aggressiveness in one type of situation (e.g. 'when teased or provoked by peers') did not strongly predict the same behaviour in situations of other types (e.g. 'when warned by adults' or 'when approached positively by peers'). That is, aggressiveness – the coarse-grained trait - failed the test for cross-situational stability. However, an individual's aggressiveness ranking in relation to others was found to 'change *systematically and predictably* in different situations' (my italics): 'the same individual who is one of the least aggressive when teased may be well known for his characteristically high level of anger and irritation when flattered and praised'. That is, at least some situation-specific traits are cross-temporally stable, but they are more like Iris Murdoch's 'specialized' traits than they are like Aristotelian ones, though the Aristotelian ones have dictionary entries to themselves while the more specialized ones do not.⁵

⁴ Iris Murdoch, *Nuns and Soldiers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980).

⁵ Walter Mischel, 'Toward an Integrative Science of the Person', *Annual Review of Psychology* 55, pp. 1-22; the quotations are from pp. 7-8. See also I. Shoda and W. Mischel, 'A cognitive-affective system theory of personality', *Psychological Review* 102 (1995), pp. 246-268, and W. Mischel and M. Peake, 'In search of consistency: measure for measure', in M.P. Zanna et al. (eds.), *Consistency in Social Behaviour: The Ontario Symposium* (Hillsdale NJ: Erlbaum, 1982). Mischel also draws the stronger

Though this finding might be a disappointment from some theoretical perspectives, I don't think it matters for policy purposes. Suppose one's concern were with promoting co-operativeness in five year-olds who have just started school, perhaps because this has itself been found to predict good learning outcomes. Given the point about what is and is not cross-situationally stable, it is likely to be hard to find a measure of co-operativeness that spans (say) co-operativeness at home, co-operativeness with teachers, co-operativeness with classroom peers and co-operativeness with strangers - indeed perhaps there is no such trait. But why bother trying to design a policy that fosters co-operativeness with teachers or with classroom peers *by* fostering the less specialized (and possibly non-existent) trait, if one can foster the specialized traits on their own? This approach might be underpinned by the Pilate-like thought that children's behaviour to strangers is no business of education policy, but it needn't be: if there can be a successful policy for fostering one specialized trait, why should there not be, at least in principle, as many possible policies as there are specialized traits to foster?

I turn now from 'specialization' to the second – and as I see it complementary - branch of my basic thought, the role of traits more general than the Aristotelian virtues in character-focused policy initiatives, and the related outcome studies. Attachment theory⁶ has been an important influence on policy-focused thinking about character, especially in relation to the early years, because attachment theorists have worked hard to establish explanatory connections both between quality of parental care and the child's attachment status to the relevant parent, and between a person's attachment status at different ages and a variety of other traits. Though these findings are to an extent work in progress, and focusing for simplicity's sake only on the 'forward-looking' connections, secure attachment – the attachment status generally seen, in our society at least, as the most desirable⁷ - has been argued to correlate with a number of desirable traits. These include (in adulthood) many

conclusion that there is an empirically robust notion of cross-temporally stable personality, which resides in 'distinctive and stable patterns of behaviour variability across situations' (2004, p. 8).

⁶ For attachment theory in general, see John Bowlby, *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds* (London: Routledge, 1979/2005), and J. Cassidy and P. Shaver (eds.), *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research and Clinical Applications* (2nd edition, New York/London: The Guilford Press, 2008).

⁷ For important cautions surrounding this issue, see Jay Belsky, "War, trauma and children's development: Observations from a modern evolutionary perspective". *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 32 (2008), pp. 260-71.

aspects of being a good parent and good love-partner ('greater sensitivity to one's children's needs', the capacity to admit vulnerability and need for the other in close personal relations without 'continually worrying about the attachment figure's availability'⁸). Children with secure attachment histories have less conflictual relationships with peers from preschool to 7 years,⁹ are less dependent on teachers in preschool,¹⁰ and more sociable with unfamiliar adults.¹¹ And though the connections between *early* attachment status and broader personality traits in later life are more controversial,¹² there is an important *contemporaneous* association, in the early years and in adulthood, between secure attachment and both the capacity for emotional self-regulation¹³ and psychological understanding.

If attachment status both explains a variety of traits and is explained by quality of parental care, how – it might be argued – could it fail to be psychologically 'robust'?¹⁴ In fact, however, the issue is complicated. First of all, attachment status even according to the most enthusiastic attachment theorists is only cross-situationally stable up to a point: a child who consistently scores 'secure' on tests in the first three years of life may change to an insecure status if relevant circumstances change (for example if the mother gets post-natal depression as a result of the birth of a second child). Secondly, though attachment status is pictured by the theory as a relatively stable explanatory trait, the tests for this trait are often situationally highly specific (e.g. behaviour on standardized tasks in the classroom or with researchers), so might what is being tested for not be a cross-situationally stable trait at all, but something more 'specialized'? Thirdly, unless either attachment status (e.g., secure) or the generalized traits (like co-operativeness or the capacity for emotional self-regulation) that it's correlated with are genuinely traits of *character* (as opposed to personal

⁸ J. Simpson and J. Belsky, "Attachment Theory within a Modern Evolutionary Framework," (in *Handbook of Attachment*, ed. Cassidy and Shaver, pp. 131-57), p. 145; M. Mikulincer and P. Shaver, "Adult Attachment and Affect Regulation" (ibid., pp. 503-531), p. 507.

⁹ Ross Thompson, "Early Attachment and Later Development," (in *Handbook of Attachment*, ed. Cassidy and Shaver, pp. 348-65), p. 355.

¹⁰ L.A. Sroufe, "Infant-caregiver attachment and patterns of adaptation in preschool," in *Minnesota Symposia on Child Psychology* vol. 16, ed. M. Perlmutter (Hillsdale NJ: Erlbaum, 1983), 41-83.

¹¹ Thompson, "Early Attachments," p. 355.

¹² For ambitious claims in this direction see L.A. Sroufe et al., *The Development of the Person: The Minnesota Study of Risk and Adaptation from Birth to Adulthood* (New York: Guilford Press, 2005).

¹³ Mikulincer and Shaver, "Adult Attachment", pp. 503-531.

¹⁴ 'The issue concerns the extent to which there are *robust character traits*', M. Merritt et al., op. cit., p. 356.

traits of some other kind) then – at least to the extent that there’s a well-understood notion of character at the heart of the situationist critique – attachment theory does not constitute any ready-made reply to situationism.

From the policy-maker’s perspective, the second of these worries is the one that can be dealt with most swiftly. A variety of measures of attachment status – parental report, long-term observation (for infants), self-report (for older children and adults) - are in fact available, so it seems unlikely that all that tests of attachment status really test for is dispositions to behave in narrowly circumscribed situations. But just supposing that were so, and the link between quality of parental care and various good outcomes did not run via attachment status but went straight to (say) the ability to concentrate on tasks, or to work effectively on one’s own, at school. If *that* narrowly circumscribed ability is itself correlated with some other good outcome, like improved literacy or numeracy,¹⁵ policy-makers interested in that outcome have enough reason to promote quality of parental care without worrying about the robustness of attachment status. In other words attachment theorists’ research would amount simply to a compendium of situationally specific correlations but – as with the first branch of this paper’s basic thought – from a policy-maker’s perspective that might be quite enough.

The first worry, by contrast, is a necessary caution to policy-makers, though since there has already been a good deal of discussion about the danger of ‘early years determinism’ perhaps I don’t need to labour the point. If attachment status is stable only to the extent that there are external factors that hold it stable, a focus on character must not help itself to the illusion that if all is done right early on, nothing further is needed to keep things on track: people need sustaining environments (such as meaningful work or stable family lives or meaningful political or religious allegiances) *throughout* life if the beneficial traits associated with secure attachment are to be sustained.

The third of my three worries is theoretically (I think) the richest, and in the scope of this paper I can’t hope to do more than make a few suggestions as to how to take the issue

¹⁵ The ability in childhood to say no to a cookie in order to get two later on has been argued to correlate with a lower risk of drug use in adulthood, O. Ayduk et al., ‘Regulating the Interpersonal Self’, *J. Personality and Soc. Psychol.* 79:5 (2000), pp. 776-92.

forward. The first point to make is that the notion of a character-trait is very much up for grabs. If it's both necessary *and sufficient* to count as a trait of character that the trait be cross-situationally stable, then attachment status is at least a candidate, as are some of the traits with which (say) secure attachment is said to be correlated, such as the capacity for emotional self-regulation. Following this line, situationism might owe some of its skeptical force to the fact that it has been looking too hard at a more or less traditional Aristotelian catalogue of virtues, but perhaps these are cross-situationally unstable because they are too superficial: there would be more stability at a deeper level occupied by attachment status, promising a picture of 'unified' virtue though not indeed along traditional Aristotelian lines. That is one possibility that I simply throw out here for further consideration.

However, there seems to be more to the notion of a character-trait – at least in the Aristotelian tradition – merely than something cross-situationally stable: being the special kind of character-trait that a virtue is also involves the capacity to make proper *judgments about the good*. (This is one thing that marks off the courageous person from the merely daring, for example: courage involves the ability not just to control fear but to do so in pursuit of a good end.) In this light, attachment status and the traits it is correlated with form a mixed bag. Friendship *is* an Aristotelian virtue,¹⁶ and 'the capacity to admit vulnerability and need for the other without continually worrying about the attachment figure's availability', plus the host of other qualities which make the securely attached good love-partners, seem like a pretty good approximation to the virtues of friendship. Emotional self-regulation, on the other hand, is said (by Aristotle) to be something the virtuous all possess, but not itself to be a virtue.¹⁷ Co-operativeness, meanwhile, seems more like an Aristotelian 'natural virtue' (with aggressiveness even harder to classify): a trait that might help one become virtuous if combined in the right way with knowledge of the good, but which does not itself imply any such knowledge. (Fraudsters conspiring to fix interest-rates need to be able to co-operate no less than well-behaved schoolchildren; aggressiveness towards peers may be bad in the classroom, but it is just what you want if you are trying to

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, books VIII-IX.

¹⁷ '[Passions] and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right aim, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of [virtue]' (*Nicomachean Ethics* II.6, 1106b).

fight bureaucratic obstacles to get your ill child seen by the right specialist.) Looked at from one direction, if cross-situational stability *and* the capacity to make judgments about the good are necessary for virtue, identifying virtues might seem even harder than if we were looking for cross-situational stability alone. But there's also a more optimistic thought available here: cross-situationally stable 'natural' virtues of a sort associated with attachment status - like co-operativeness or, negatively perhaps, aggressiveness – *yield* the capacity to make the right judgments about the good in favourable situations, that is, yield 'specialized' virtues. Thus the second branch of my basic thought – that cross-situational stability, if it is to be found, lies not in traditional Aristotelian virtues but in underlying traits that are neither themselves virtues nor vices – would join hands with the first branch, that such virtues as we imperfect humans possess are likely to be specialized.