



## **A Threat to Traits: Ethical Expertise and the Situationist Challenge**

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 3<sup>th</sup> – Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> January 2019.

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# ***A Threat to Traits: Ethical Expertise and the Situationist Challenge***

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## ***Introduction***

The attempts by traditional virtue-ethical approaches to tackle the situationist challenge to global traits have not been entirely satisfying. In this paper, we aim at tackling the situationist challenge to global traits by proposing a different, and in our view much more promising, approach centered on the reconceptualization of the notion of phronesis, conceived as *ethical expertise*. This amounts to the proposal of a global, unified account of phronesis, which encompasses the features usually attributed to the single ethical virtues, as opposed to a proliferation of distinct, global character traits.

In the following, we will outline what can be labelled as the “Standard Aristotelian View”, recap the core of the situationist attack to it, and critically assess some virtue-ethical replies. Then, we will move from Webber’s counterattack to situationism (cf. Webber 2006; 2007) and to its behaviorist conception, which claims that the virtues, rather than being standardized patterns of behavior, have to do with the much harder job of balancing conflicting invitations issued by the complexity of real-life situations. This account has the great advantage of offering a much richer and credible account of how the virtues operate by balancing competing reasons for action and sources of moral demandingness, making the virtues patterns of flexible response to situations. However, we think in order to be more compelling and to offer a fully satisfying explanation of how the virtues operate in situation managing, it should be integrated with a different picture of the relation between global traits and practical wisdom. This is what we do by introducing our novel account – which we have developed in greater detail in a previous work (De Caro, Vaccarezza and Niccoli, 2018) – that conceives of phronesis as ethical expertise. Phronesis as ethical expertise, in our view, should be interpreted as a gradually developing single trait, as opposed to the proliferation of distinct character traits traditionally accounted for by Aristotle and neo-Aristotelians. Such a master virtue, we will argue, helps making sense of the need for an effective management of complex situations, and better faces the situationist challenge than approaches based on distinct and diverse global traits.

### ***1. The Standard Aristotelian View and the Situationist Critique***

Most Aristotelian virtue ethicists have traditionally held what we might call the *Standard Aristotelian View* (SAV) regarding the virtues, and their nature and functioning. Although this label may appear out of place, given the innumerable differences between the Aristotelian approaches, it is useful, in our view, focusing on some core assumptions that are common to most traditional accounts. Among these features, we take it as central to SAV that the virtues are robust global traits, which manifest themselves as reliable, stable and cross-situational. This means that if Jane is, say, courageous on the battlefield, *ceteris paribus*, she will manifest courage also when fighting a serious illness, or when finding herself in a situation where her

colleague Phil is psychologically threatened by their boss and she has a chance to defend Phil by speaking up for him.

Also, SAV has it as part of virtue ethics's hard core that the virtues have explanatory and predictive power, meaning that (a) the reason why Jane speaks up for Phil is her possessing the virtue of courage, and (b) Jane's courage makes it possible to predict reliably her future behavior. Finally, a feature SAV attributes as central to the virtues is their being weakly or strongly integrated<sup>1</sup>. In other words, if Jane is courageous, she is likely to be also generous, honest, and humble. More radically, according to some extreme "unity of the virtues" supporters, if Jane is truly courageous, she has to be also generous, honest, humble, and so forth. It is specifically towards these features that, as we will show in a moment, the situationists address their harshest attack, by providing empirical evidence against the very possibility that someone possesses traits of this kind.

As it is well-known, the philosophers who advocate situationism have provided over time increasing empirical evidence – mostly drawn from social psychology – to the effect that there are no such things as the traditionally conceived global character traits, whose main features were supposed to be stability over time and cross-situational consistency. Walter Mischel, Yuiki Schoda, and others have been the first situationists to challenge the traditional virtue-ethical account of character, and to show that most people are surprisingly easily influenced by trivial and normatively irrelevant situational factors, such as mood elevators and depressors, ambient sounds, ambient smells, ambient light levels, presence of bystanders and other group effects, etc. Personality variables like traits, on the other hand, predict less than 10% of behavior. This evidence suggests, according to situationists, that the structure of personality and behavior is incompatible with the very idea of stable, cross-situational and consistent character traits.

John Doris (1998, 2002) and Gilbert Harman (1999, 2000, 2003) have famously weakened situationism, making it a better theoretical option. Doris, in particular, claims that the best explanation for the lack of cross-situational consistency is the fact that most people display local, rather than global, traits. People, i.e., are not honest, courageous, or greedy, but they may be honest-while-in-a-good-mood, courageous-while-sailing-in-rough-weather-with-friends, and greedy-unless-watched-by-fellow-parishioners.

## **2. Some Virtue-Ethical Counterattacks**

Several different strategies have been adopted to address this challenge, leading to the development of much more empirically credible accounts of character and moral personality. Among the most relevant attempts to rephrase the discourse over the virtues in light of empirical results, we can find: (i) Alfano's theory of *Character as moral fiction* (2013), that argues that virtue as well as vice attribution functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy, to the effect that people frequently tend to act according to the virtue and vices that tend to others attribute to them. He therefore proposes to conceive moral traits as factitious virtues,

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<sup>1</sup> Notably, there is deep disagreement on the degree of integration (if any) a neo-Aristotelian theory of virtues requires. Among supporters of a strong unity or integration of the virtues thesis, we can number Irwin (1988), Annas (1993), and Wolf (2007). By contrast, Foot (1978), Nagel (1979), Williams (1982), Walker (1993), and McDowell (1998) are fundamentally disunitarists, since either they do not believe the virtues to be mutually compatible (what Badhwar calls Mutual Incompatibility of the Virtues, and Walker Conflict Assumption) or they claim that there is no need for a virtue to be accompanied by all others to be genuine (Mutual Independence of the Virtues, in Badhwar's words). Badhwar (1996) and Russell (2009) propose a weaker version of the unity thesis.

so as to include social expectations within an account of moral character; (ii) Nancy Snow's account in her *Virtue as social intelligence*, where she argues that philosophical situationists rely on evidence drawn from the wrong kinds of situations: rather than looking at situations that are *objectively* similar, they should compare situations that have similar meanings *for the subject*; (iii) Chris Miller's *Mixed global traits* framework (2013a, 2013b), which conceives of character traits as global, i.e., they explain and predict behavior across situations, but normatively mixed, i.e., neither virtues nor vices.

All these attempts have their respective merits and strengths; however, in our opinion the first necessary step towards a much-needed reshaping of virtue ethics – such that this theory can satisfyingly respond to the situationist challenge – is the critique developed by Jonathan Webber (2006, 2007) against the so-called “*fragmentation theory*”. Webber claims that, contrary to the behaviorist explanations of empirical data, each experimental situation presents opportunities for different traits to manifest. Consequently, conceiving of global traits in purely behavioristic terms fails to account for (i) the complexity of real-life situations, where conflicting invitations to action are normally issued; (ii) the proper functioning of the virtues, that rather than being standardized patterns of behavior, have to do with the much harder job of balancing conflicting invitations issued by the complexity of real-life situations. This problem, Webber argues, derives from Doris's, Merrit's, and Goldie's theoretical assumptions, according to which global traits – should they exist – would reliably manifest themselves across different situations by giving consistently rise to a distinctive kind of behavior independently of contrary pressures exerted by situations. These assumptions, in turn, hint to situations that invite ‘the manifestation of one single trait, regardless of whether there are countervailing pressures’ (Webber 2007:2). Thus, this kind of account rules out the existence of global traits by defining them in behavioristic terms, as blind responses to specific stimuli, and by excluding the possibility of an orchestrating role played by some mediating mental items; also, it unnecessarily leads to a massive proliferation – or a “combinatorial explosion” (Ibid.) – of potential local traits.

### **3. *Phronesis as Ethical Expertise***

Webber's counterattack is an extremely promising strategy that we aim at backing up. However, in our view, while on the one hand the behaviorist fragmentation view assumed by situationism can be shown to be inadequate, on the other standard virtue-ethical theories are equally inadequate, in that they presuppose an unrealistic fragmented account of discrete global traits. In particular, our criticism addresses what may be seen as three fundamental assumptions of most (if not all) SAV's accounts. These assumptions – whose acceptance is so widespread that it might appear redundant to even mention them – are the following:

- (i) Ethical virtues are discrete character traits, each representing a disposition to act virtuously in a given moral area or domain;
- (ii) Phronesis and ethical virtues are distinct dispositions – the former being the condition of moral-cognitive excellence, and the latter being a set of emotional traits (or habitual states) shaped by phronesis itself;
- (iii) Phronesis necessarily implies (and is implied by) the possession of ethical virtues that orient it towards the goods pertaining to the various moral domains.

Some virtue-ethicists, of course, may protest our simplification and contend that (iii), despite being related with (i) and (ii), is false and should be rejected, or at least softened and transformed into a more realistic thesis, such as the Limited Unity of the Virtues thesis (Badhwar 1996). At any rate, only few virtue ethicists would disagree with (i) and (ii). However, our intuition is that it is precisely the acceptance of these two claims that makes SAV more vulnerable to the situationist attacks than it would be if it was grounded on different fundamental assumptions. That is why we propose to replace SAV's three basic assumptions with the following three:

- (i) There is no such thing as a discrete ethical virtue;
- (ii) The only real virtue is the single virtue of phronesis, to be conceived as a form of ethical expertise that applies to different domains and encompasses both cognitive and emotional components;
- (iii) The traditional ethical virtues should be conceived as "names" or applications of ethical expertise in each specific domain.

What we are proposing is therefore a new account of the Socratic view on the unity of virtue, revisited in terms of a deeper integration of reason and emotion and grounded in wisdom as ethical expertise. By "Socratic view", we mean the view expressed by Socrates in Plato's *Protagoras*, 356d–7b. There Socrates claims that courage, temperance, and all the other virtues, are names (or branches, versions, or applications) of wisdom – a view that, in the contemporary debate on virtue ethics, has been defended by John McDowell<sup>2</sup>.

Thus, our version of phronesis as ethical expertise is Socratic in spirit and indebted to McDowell, in that it holds the unity of virtue; however, it does not equate virtue with knowledge (as both Socrates and McDowell do), since it identifies virtue with an ethical *expertise*, conceived of as a master, global and unifying virtue, which is affective and rational at the same time.

Our view has three main tenets:

- (i) *Conceptual thesis*: the virtue that a virtuous agent really possesses is wisdom as ethical expertise, while all the other virtues are just descriptions of wisdom within the specific moral fields;
- (ii) *Epistemic access thesis*: when we attribute a specific virtue to an agent, we have preliminarily recognized that such agent is practically wise (in this light, admiration is not elicited by an attribution of, say, courage, but by a prima facie attribution of practical wisdom, conceived as unified ethical expertise, which implies the recognition of a dynamic tendency to integrity, instead of a static unity of the virtues);
- (iii) *Educational implications*: moral education should consist primarily in training an overall ethical expertise rather than habituating the young to the exercise of specific specific virtues.

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that Doris challenges directly McDowell's "inseparability of virtue" thesis, as well as weaker versions of it (2002: 21), despite acknowledging that empirical evidence might not be sufficient to rule out the idea that perfect virtue, no matter how rare, requires inseparability. However, we think our account fares much better than McDowell's in resisting Doris' criticism, since, as we are about to show, it requires actual possession of full ethical expertise only in some respect.

In this light, we propose a new view, opposed to SAV, that is grounded in a revised McDowellian “unity of virtue” thesis. In our view, practical wisdom is a unified or general form of ethical expertise, which encompasses all traits that traditionally are instead conceived as distinct. Therefore, according to us, when one is virtuous, what one really possesses is the single virtue of practical wisdom, understood as ethical expertise, while the other virtues are descriptions of such expertise in each different moral field. This means that when we label someone as, say, courageous, what we really admire is one’s being wise (i.e., ethically expert) in the field of danger and fear, broadly conceived – so that courage is the name of wisdom in that particular domain. This wisdom, in turn, can be better understood as an overall ethical expertise, i.e., as a unified skill, which, although being general in scope, can gradually improve. Two key features of our concept of expertise apply to the ethical domain:

- i. Unreflective skillful action plays a relevant (although not exhaustive) role in displaying ethical behavior;
- ii. Becoming an expert requires a progression from a narrow and procedural practice toward a distinctive openness and flexibility. In this perspective, we are committed, *contra* Jacobson, to “the idea that moral learning can transcend local expertise.”

Obviously, in characterizing wisdom as a unified ethical expertise, we presuppose the controversial idea that virtues can be seen as skills. This is not the place to adequately defend this idea; however, we can at least notice that – contrary to Stichter, who embraces an empiricist interpretation of the skill model, and concedes that moral expertise does not need any kind of generalization and knowledge – we sympathize with Hacker-Wright’s view that the skill model of virtue should be able to account for the unifying cognitive role of practical wisdom, which guides the virtues to the right general ends. In this perspective, being wise does not mean that one possesses *all* the virtues (who does?), but rather being open to the overall good and attentive to the specific situations one finds oneself in. Furthermore, integrity becomes the regulative ideal of moral agency. In other words, we can deem as wise not only the (non-existent) agents who actually display a completely virtuous character, but also those who (and this is instead a frequent situation) (i) are oriented – both affectively and cognitively – toward an overall good life and fare well in at least some moral domains and (ii) acknowledge their shortcomings in other domains and try to improve themselves there.

More analytically, when we judge that an agent is wise, we attribute to them the following features of wisdom:

1. *Expertise* within a specific moral domain, which consists of:
  - Orientation toward the good, aimed at achieving it within that specific domain;
  - Fine-tuned perception of the moral requirements imposed by the situation;
  - Acknowledgement of one’s lacks within other domains.
2. *Openness to new domains and situations*, by means of attention and the exercise of moral perception, with the will to improve oneself in those new domains and situations, so as to obtain an overall virtuous character.

In our opinion, if one combines Webber's account of how we should conceive of global traits with our new account of wisdom as ethical expertise, one can respond to the most relevant situationist criticisms without ending up with supporting a merely local view of character traits. By gathering all moral excellences in the single virtue of wisdom as ethical expertise, our position appears better equipped than the traditional views against the situationists' criticisms, and especially their allegations of essentialism and fragmentation. In particular, we think that SAV's account is weak and inadequate for two main reasons, which are intrinsically tied to its core claims and make this view vulnerable to situationism.

*Essentialism:* SAV typically presupposes cross-situational identity of all the acts falling under the scope of the same virtue (for example, all acts of courage are supposed to share a unique common property). According to situationists, however, empirical evidence suggests that there are no such things as consistent, cross-situational and stable character traits, and consequently SAV lacks the empirical support that would be necessary to ground its view of ethical virtues. We believe that those criticisms should be taken seriously; and we also believe that traditional SAV theories fail to acknowledge the radical novelty of every ethical situation.

*Fragmentation:* From the SAV's perspective, each virtue regulates and governs – under the guidance of the orchestrating master virtue of phronesis – a specific sphere of moral experience, which is conceptually distinct from every other sphere. This account, however, amounts to a fragmentation of moral experience that, in some extreme versions, can lead to conceiving of each virtue as aiming at a conceptually distinct goal – to the point of generating many conflicting commitments for the agent. Given such fragmentation, SAV faces the problem of how the unifying master virtue of phronesis can effectively reconcile the conflicting values and goals of the agent.

Our proposal avoids the risk of the fragmentation of value in a straightforward way. The unity and integration of moral agency are preserved by both the unification of all virtues under the single master virtue of wisdom and the peculiar orientation that the latter has toward the overall good of the agent. Moreover, the fact that our account gets rid of the various virtuous traits defends it from the charge of essentialism as well. By claiming that acting well in a given circumstance requires the possession of a form of wisdom that is sensitive to the particularity of the situation's moral requirements, we are open to the idea that each situation is partly novel and, consequently, cannot be addressed as if it were a mere token of a general type.

Summarizing, in our view, situationism is right in opposing an implausible version of the globalist view of every specific character trait. However, instead of concluding, with the situationists, that it is not character, but the concrete situations that determine most of our predictable behavior, we address the situationist challenge by appealing to a more flexible notion of character – one that is not limited to the possession of a set of discrete skills, but is constituted by a unified ethical expertise that enables the agent to face specific (and especially new) situations.





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