

Situationism Revisited: A Critique of the Practical Intelligence Defense*

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Abstract: Some empirical, psychological research shows that situational variables normally thought to be of little or no significance to character traits, either in their formation or expression, are statistically much more significant factors in predicting and explaining moral behavior than are the social and psychological factors normally associated with virtuous character traits. At best, I and other situationist philosophers think, this research allows for a list of personality traits that bears little resemblance to any classical or commonsense list of virtues. Further, attempts to harmonize these two sorts of lists are not sensitive enough to either the differences in reasons for behavior in diverse situations or to the (in)accuracy of self-reporting. Here I survey some recent attempts by virtue theorists to respond to the situationist challenge, noting several important similarities between them. These I group under the heading “Practical Intelligence Defense” (PID). This defense, I take it, represents the core intuitions which drive the anti-situationist philosophical/psychological response, and which separate the interpretations of the empirical psychological data between those friendly to situationism and those hostile to it. I then give three arguments against the PID.

Recent years have seen a flurry of responses to the so-called situationist critique of virtue made prominent by philosophers such as John Doris and Gilbert Harman.¹ Among the most important of those responses are those included in Adams (2006),² Russell (2009),³ and others.⁴ Here I will survey in broad outline those responses, and note their similarities. I will then formulate a thesis—the Practical Intelligence Defense (PID)—which I mean to encapsulate the intuitions at the heart of all these responses. I’ll then give three arguments (and a suggestion for a fourth) against the PID, concluding that virtue theoretical interpretations of the psychological data remain explanatorily inferior to skeptical interpretations.⁵

¹ John Doris, *Lack of Character, Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Gilbert Harman, “The Nonexistence of Character Traits,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100 (2000): 223–26; John Doris and the Moral Psychology Research Group (eds.), *The Moral Psychology Handbook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

² Robert Adams, *A Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2006).

³ Daniel C. Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2009).

⁴ See also Nancy E. Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence: An Empirically Grounded Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Rachana Kamtekar, “Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character,” *Ethics* 114 (2004): 458–91.; Christian Miller, “Social Psychology and Virtue Ethics,” *The Journal of Ethics* 7 (2003): 365–92; John Sabini and Maury Silver, “Lack of Character? Situationism Critiqued,” *Ethics* 115 (2005): 535–62; Robert Solomon, “Victims of Circumstances? A Defense of Virtue Ethics in Business,” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 13 (2003): 43–62; Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2011), 173–4.

⁵ I will use the terms “virtue theory,” “virtue ethics,” and their derivatives interchangeably throughout, ignoring for present purposes the distinction common in the literature between *virtue ethics* as a distinct ethical approach (competitive

Before moving into the survey of the literature, it will be helpful to say a bit more about the notion of situationism that I mean to maintain against the PID. My claim is that some empirical, psychological research shows that situational variables normally thought to be of little or no significance to character traits, either in their formation or expression (in comparison with other social and psychological factors), are statistically much more significant factors in predicting and explaining moral behavior than are the social and psychological factors normally associated with virtuous character traits. This is supported by a wide range of well-known empirical psychological research.⁶ John Doris and Stephen Stich provide a helpful basic list of such findings:

- Isen and Levin (1972: 387) discovered that subjects who had just found a dime were 22 times more likely to help a woman who had dropped some papers than subjects who did not find a dime (88% v. 4%).⁷
- Darley and Batson (1973: 105) report that passersby not in a hurry were 6 times more likely to help an unfortunate who appeared to be in significant distress than were passersby in a hurry (63% v. 10%).⁸
- Matthews and Canon (1975: 574–5) found subjects were 5 times more likely to help an apparently injured man who had dropped some books when ambient noise was at normal levels than when a power lawnmower was running nearby (80% v. 15%).⁹
- Haney *et al.* (1973) describe how college students role-playing as “guards” in a simulated prison subjected student “prisoners” to intense verbal and emotional abuse.¹⁰
- Milgram (1974) found that subjects would repeatedly “punish” a screaming “victim” with realistic (but simulated) electric shocks at the polite request of an experimenter.¹¹

Given such results, situationist philosophers think that this research allows for, at best, a list of personality traits that bears little resemblance to any classical or commonsense list of virtues. Further, attempts to harmonize these two sorts of lists (the most prominent of which I will here group under the PID) are not sensitive enough to either the differences in reasons for behavior in diverse situations or to the (in)accuracy of self-reporting. However,

with deontology and consequentialism), and *virtue theory* as an account of virtue within any broader ethical outlook. I here use the term(s) to denote any ethical theory which requires the existence of robust, cross-situationally consistent character traits in any but a tiny minority of human persons.

⁶ For fuller accounts, see Lee Ross and Richard E. Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991); and Doris, *Lack of Character*.

⁷ A.M. Isen and P.F. Levin, “Effect of Feeling Good on Helping: Cookies and Kindness,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 21 (1972): 384–88.

⁸ J.M. Darley and C.D. Batson, “From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables In Helping Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 27 (1973): 100–108.

⁹ K.E. Matthews and L.K. Cannon, “Environmental Noise Level as a Determinant of Helping Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 32 (1975): 571–77.

¹⁰ C. Haney, W. Banks, and P. Zimbardo, “Interpersonal Dynamics of a Simulated Prison,” *International Journal of Criminology and Penology* 1 (1973): 69–97.

¹¹ Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

¹² List taken from John Doris and Stephen Stich, “Moral Psychology: Empirical Approaches,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/moral-psych-emp/>.

there are several claims associated with the situationist critique from which I wish to distance myself, some of which have been the target of the PID accounts we are surveying. Here are some things I do *not* mean to say:

1. *That there are no character traits at all.* I defend only the claim that it's unlikely that whatever reliable, cross-situationally consistent behavioral dispositions there may be will in the end closely resemble any list of virtues recognizable to ordinary folk.
2. *That all virtues (if such there be) are (or are primarily) what Robert Adams calls "direct behavioral dispositions."* I do not mean to downplay the significance of "internal" (motivational, psychological, etc.) factors at play in any stable traits there may be (indeed, one such factor—reasons—plays a significant role in why I think it unlikely that there are such traits with a moral valence), but I do not want to downplay the significance of behavior either. We will find this a difficult balance to strike.
3. *That there is a simple, straightforward inference from the experimental data to the absence of character.* This sort of assumption is implied by Doris, e.g., when he says things like: "In very many situations it looks as though personality is less than robustly determinative of behavior. To put things crudely, people typically lack character."¹³ Rather, I recognize that the issue is interpretively difficult and fraught with complexity—hence the cautious nature of my conclusion.
4. *That virtue cannot be grounded in empirical psychology.* It is, for all I know, possible to reorient virtue talk around contemporary empirical psychological concepts/terminology, but doing so will not get us to the conclusion that an inference from empirical psychological findings to the truth of a classical virtue theory is warranted.

This last is because, as I will argue, empirical psychology, even when properly adjusted to be responsive to internal, subject-sensitive considerations, cannot by itself overcome the skeptical worry that robust character traits (like virtues) are the product of a rationalizing tendency to construct a workable narrative that can incorporate largely unconscious mental processes to which we may very well have no privileged access. This skeptical thesis is strengthened by noting the wide divergence in reasons allowed for under any virtue-behavior-type, and the findings of some empirical psychological studies that people tend to be bad at self-reporting their evaluative motives.

§1: Recent Responses to Situationism

Robert Adams

Robert Adams has a unique response to situationism in his book *A Theory of Virtue* that, as we will see, bears significant resemblances to the PID. There, he helpfully provides a nice introduction to some of the situationist empirical findings by starting with the Hartshorne and May (1920's) study which looked at the tendency toward honesty (lying, cheating, and stealing) of 2,443 schoolchildren and found that very few were consistently

¹³ Doris, *Lack of Character*, 2. One might think this so "crude" as to amount to a *non sequitur*.

honest (7%) or dishonest (<4%) across all situations (with interpretation of the data skewed toward honesty), and that the rest were inconsistent across situations. Adams is careful to point out that this does not mean there was *no* positive correlation between similar behavior in different situations, but rather that this correlation was *low*—usually between .10 and .20, and sometimes lower. Thus, researchers generally conclude from such studies that if there are cross-situationally consistent traits, they have low explanatory and predictive power. On the other hand, situational features have much higher explanatory and predictive power, even when those features apparently bear little or no moral significance—as in the Isen and Levin 1972 study cited above, where the subjects help an experimenter pick up papers (seemingly) based on whether or not they find a dime in a phone booth.¹⁴

Adams discerns three styles of response to the situationist critique in the literature prior to him:

- (1) Capitulate to the situationists and give up consistent moral dispositions as a part of one's theory of virtue (making it instead about occurrent states/attitudes).
- (2) Deny that situationism touches classical virtue at all.
- (3) Assert that situationism fails to show that moral virtues are not real or uncommon, but admit that they are “frail.”

The first sort of response is much stronger than the PID, and Adams rightly rejects it for giving up too easily on enduring traits as constitutive of virtue, and for rendering meaningless the project of moral education or development.¹⁵ The second approach—to deny that situationism touches classical virtue at all—is taken up for 2 reasons: First, classical virtue was/is not supposed to be common. It should be no surprise, so the reasoning goes, if virtue turns out to be exceedingly rare. (One can imagine Plato, e.g., being nonplussed at all the worry over preserving the possibility of something like full virtue for the masses.) Moreover, this result would not rule out virtue as an ideal worthy of aspiration, even for those who may never achieve it. Second, classical virtue has an *evaluative* component, i.e. the virtuous person deals *appropriately* with her situations. This evaluation is controversial and unlikely to be convincingly tested for by social psychologists. One approach of this type (Kamtekar)¹⁶ says that classical virtues are expressions of practical wisdom in different situations, and thus consistent with empirical findings (essentially the PID, which we'll see repeated by others below). Adams is sympathetic to this kind of approach, and thinks it the most consistent with the classical view of virtue, but he rejects it because he favors a picture of virtue that makes it available to normal, frail people who cannot always control their situations. As he says, “If I do not adopt a strategy of this type, that is because I believe it is important to find moral excellence in imperfect human lives, and because I disagree with ancient views about the kind of integration human virtue can and should have.”¹⁷ Thus, the third strategy, and Adams's preferred one, is to affirm that there are real moral virtues that are not extremely rare. This means, as Adams notes, disagreeing with classical conceptions of virtue, by which a virtuous character is sufficient for motivation to right action across

¹⁴ Adams, *A Theory of Virtue*, 117-8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁶ Kamtekar, “Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character.”

¹⁷ Adams, *A Theory of Virtue*, 119.

situations. Thus, something other than this self-sufficiency is needed to ground stability of character for normal, frail people.

In light of the situationist challenge, this question takes two forms: what Adams labels the “frailty problem” (i.e. the question whether desirable character traits are too fragile or dependent on situational factors to count as a virtues) and the “inconsistency problem” (i.e. the question whether any traits have sufficient generality and consistency across situations to count as virtues).¹⁸ I am here more concerned with this second sort of worry. I recognize the force of Adams’s focus on frailty and the need for attributing virtue more widely than to only a select few (or none); indeed, I am sympathetic with it. But this approach seems to me less a response to the situationist and more a thesis about what virtue must be like *if* the situationist can be overcome. I.e. I do not see that frailty need play a significant role in the situationist argument; indeed, we are not in a position to admit the likelihood of even frail character traits (if these are enduring and cross-situationally consistent) until we have overcome the situationist challenge. Thus, I think Adams’s response actually depends for its strength on something very much like the PID, as we will see.

Adams helpfully notes that thinking solely in terms of “direct behavioral dispositions” is not the best way to talk about virtues. Adams borrows this term from Richard Brandt, who defines a direct behavioral disposition theory as one which

...proposes that *for various trait-names a form of behavior typical of that trait can be identified* (as talking for talkativeness), and that what it is for a person to have a certain trait is primarily for him to be *disposed to behave in the correlated typical way, in certain conditions, relatively frequently*.¹⁹

Adams is uneasy with these dispositions since they do not take motivation into account, and so cannot be sufficient for an account of virtue. Nonetheless, he admits that they probably are still necessary features of many (most?) virtues.²⁰ He also notes one overlooked qualification on the psychological situationist findings: that certain *probabilistic* “traits” are still allowed. I.e., with a large enough sample size and enough recorded situational responses, we can predict a mean probability for any individual’s behavior across a number of hypothetical future situations. What we cannot do is predict with any accuracy an individual’s behavior in the *next* situation. E.g., if Bob is the (average) 2nd most aggressive member of a large sample with many varied situational iterations, and we take cross-situational correlation to be .16 (typical), then, while we cannot say whether Bob is likely be aggressive in the next situation, we can say that there is a 60% chance that he will be one of the 2 most aggressive of the sample in one of the next 10 situations presented to the same group. Similarly, if Sally is the (average) 2nd least aggressive member of the same group, then we can predict that there is a <1% chance that Sally will be one of the two most aggressive in at least one of the next 10

¹⁸ Ibid., 118-20.

¹⁹ Richard Brandt, “Traits of Character: A Conceptual Analysis,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 7.1 (1970): 23-37; quoted in Adams, *A Theory of Virtue*, 120.

²⁰ Adams, *A Theory of Virtue*, 120-2.

situations presented to the group.²¹ Pragmatically, this is significant, says Adams, and constitutes a real moral deficiency:

“These considerations suggest that direct behavioral dispositions may play a major part in constituting cross-situational virtues and vices if they are understood in probabilistic terms. Behavioral dispositions involved in constituting a virtue...need not predict with certainty; it is enough for them to amount to significant probabilities of relevant behavior.”²²

The thing to note about such probabilistic traits is that they are very weak, both predictively and explanatorily, and more importantly, that they do not at all resemble what any ordinary person would recognize as a virtue. When Aristotle talks of courage, one thing it is safe to say he does *not* have in mind is the stable but still relatively low probability that someone will, in one of the next several situations with which he is presented, behave in a way consistent to the mean response he has given in the last (high) number of situations. Thus, I do not think probabilistic traits are a serious option for virtue theorists.

Another aspect of the empirical findings that philosophical situationists overlook, says Adams, is that there may still be so-called “modular” virtues. The claim that there are behavioral dispositions that amount to “modules of virtue” includes 4 sub-claims (2 causal & 2 evaluative): (a) Direct behavioral dispositions are commonly mutually independent in a way that is domain specific, where these domains may be narrowly defined situations or even broad social roles.²³ (b) These domain-specific dispositions “can be added together to form a more inclusive composite disposition.”²⁴ The combined disposition would be “a more general, and more consistent, disposition to behave in the relevant way in a wide variety of situations.”²⁵ (c) At least in some cases, these dispositions are “good” (or bad, presumably). (d) Adding these dispositions together to form a larger, cross-situationally consistent composite disposition can be seen as constituting a more complete case of the “virtue” in question.²⁶

Several traditional virtues can be divided into something like modules, e.g. courage or honesty. Adams wonders: why not interpret the situationist psychological evidence as revealing modular virtues? As he says:

Here we may try to state provisionally what moral psychology should learn from the empirical evidence of cross-situational inconsistency in behavioral dispositions, ethically defined. The lesson, I believe, is not that no such dispositions manifest

²¹ Ibid., 122-3. Adams relies here on Ross and Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation*, 107-18.

²² Ibid., 122-4.

²³ Adams here assumes that there are domain-neutral (rational) capacities that allow one to unify and navigate between these modules. This will be something very much like practical intelligence. Clearly, if Adams is right that this capacity is domain-neutral, then the situationist critique is seriously diminished and the PID significantly strengthened. Surprisingly, Adams offers little by way of argument for this claim, which appears to beg the question against critiques of PID such as the one I offer here.

²⁴ Ibid., 126.

²⁵ Ibid., 127.

²⁶ Ibid.

virtues, but rather that it will typically be as probabilistic or modular traits that they manifest virtues, if they do.”²⁷

Note that with this admission Adams has already separated himself from the less conciliatory brand of virtue theoretical response to the situationist, exemplified by Russell and Snow, discussed below. Nonetheless, the possibility of modular virtues depends on something very much like the PID, since aggregating the relevant situational dispositions into a larger composite disposition will require a rational capacity to appropriately discern the right situational features to be included as part of the composite, and to accord the right weight to every possible action response to those features in one’s survey of possible behaviors. In other words, one needs practical intelligence.

Additionally—and this is just another way of putting the same point—one could presumably list the low-level dispositions allowed for on the empirical evidence for any individual, and conjoin these into one long proposition—say, the proposition, “Susan is disposed to help a cohort in distress *if* she has found a dime (or had a similarly positive mood-inducing experience) in the last five minutes, and/or *if* she is not in a hurry, and/or *if* her senses are not overstimulated, and/or *if* she is not playing the role of a guard in a fictional prison, and/or *if* she is not being asked by a perceived authority to behave otherwise, and/or ...” This proposition could, I suppose, be thought to describe a cross-situationally stable personality trait, albeit an odd one. But if we are to distinguish in a principled way purely descriptive, conjunction-traits like this one from more easily recognized character traits like, say, honesty, courage, generosity, and the like, then we will need a well-founded mechanism by which to do so, and practical intelligence seems to be the best (only?) contender.

Some psychologists (Ross & Nisbett, Mischel²⁸) note that more statistically significant differences between individuals lie in internal factors, like motivations, plans, etc., rather than in straightforward direct behavioral dispositions.²⁹ Adams argues that these “person variables” should count as character traits, since they “play a central part in the constitution of virtues and vices according to most theories of virtue.”³⁰ He says that “theorists of virtue should not be disturbed by the suggestion that many of the virtues are not to be identified simply in terms of their behavioral output, as direct behavioral dispositions, but rather in terms of the way they enter into complex psychological interactions in which many factors jointly shape behavior.” He concludes: “...the dispositions involved in [these personality traits] will typically be dispositions, first of all, to types of psychological processing, rather than directly to types of observable physical behavior.”³¹ However, this is problematic because the claim still seems to be that *both* dispositions to behavior *and* to these types of psychological processing are *necessary* for virtue, so that saying that such personality traits can be virtues is misleading unless we have evidence that they are reliably accompanied by behavioral dispositions which match standard lists of virtues.

²⁷ Ibid., 130.

²⁸ Walter Mischel, *Introduction to Personality*, 2nd ed. (New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1976).

²⁹ Adams, *A Theory of Virtue*, 131.

³⁰ Ibid., 132.

³¹ Ibid.

But this is precisely what situationists allege is *not* the case. The empirical evidence is that virtuous behavior is not cross-situationally consistent in a statistically significant way. Thus, Adams has not made the case that the situationist findings allow for anything like global character traits, or even passable probabilistic or modular traits. As we saw, probabilistic traits are too weak and unlike classical virtues to be interpreted as robust character traits. Additionally, the claim that modular traits can count as virtues depends for its force on PID, and so will be subject to the criticisms leveled against it below. Also, on any reasonable theory of virtue, behavior is a necessary condition of identifying a character trait. The PID stresses psychological dispositions sometimes at the expense of downplaying behavior. But the psychological data is all behavioral (if we count self-reporting as behavior), and therefore our best evidence for the existence of cross-situationally consistent traits must be interpreted via behavior.

Daniel C. Russell

In chapter 10 of his excellent book *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, Daniel C. Russell presents an interesting response to situationism. Indeed, in some ways it is less a response to situationism and more a usurpation of it. Contrary to virtually all commentators before him, Russell does not try to “get around” the experimental evidence or reinterpret it to be less offensive to classical virtue. Rather, he assumes it wholesale, arguing *for* the standard situational interpretation of the data, and claiming that this is in fact a *good* thing for virtue theory. His reasoning for this conclusion takes us squarely into the territory of the PID: what virtue amounts to on many accounts (the most defensible according to Russell) is the proper employment of practical reasoning, and whatever else practical reasoning may amount to, it involves discerning the appropriate response to the salient features of one’s situation. Thus, Russell thinks the error of the situationist paradigm lies not in the data, nor even in its interpretation by psychologists, but rather in the somewhat hasty philosophical conclusions that have been drawn from it by philosophers like Harman and Doris. Indeed, Russell argues that situationist psychology also suggests a *positive* theory of personality, and once this is taken into account, it “*leads naturally* to a certain philosophical theory of the virtues.”³² Of course the result of this claim is that any theory of virtue that is to be deemed empirically adequate must be a theory that requires practical intelligence as a core component (Russell labels this “Hard Virtue Theory”).³³ Thus, Russell essentially agrees with my points a couple paragraphs ago—if one is to maintain an empirically adequate theory and still respond to the philosophical situationist charge, then one must rely on practical intelligence.

Doris is not unaware of this possibility, however, and so Russell spends a fair amount of time dealing with his objections.³⁴ Russell’s goal, as he states it, is to “defend the idea that virtue theory...can embrace the positive conception of personality that situationism suggests.”³⁵ And much as we saw with Adams, this means moving away from a purely

³² Daniel C. Russell, *Practical Intelligence*, xii. Italics in original.

³³ As he defines it, a Hard Virtue Theory is committed to the claim that phronesis is a “central feature of every virtue.” Ibid.

³⁴ As interpreted and predicted from Doris’s earlier book.

³⁵ Ibid., 294.

dispositional understanding of virtue and paying more attention to internal factors. For Russell (and for Snow³⁶), this amounts to orienting virtue around certain cognitive-affective personality traits postulated by personality psychologists. Doing so will obviously make a large difference for how we determine cross-situational consistency, and thus for how problematic the situationist critique really is for virtue theory. Doris, however, provides two objections to this sort of attempt (as discerned by Russell):

...one, that psychological (rather than nominal) characterizations of situations make cross-situational consistency come cheap; and two, that such consistency would not match the normative standards of a virtue theory anyway.³⁷

Russell introduces the “psychological/nominal” distinction earlier in the book to denote much the same thing that Adams gets at with his discussion of direct behavioral dispositions and motivations; it is, roughly an internal/external distinction—a first vs. third person perspective. Russell borrows his language from Mischel, who intends “nominal” to designate “those features of situations that are independent of how agents construe and attach salience to their situations,” and “psychological” to attach to “those features that obtain in virtue of how the agent construes the situation.”³⁸

Doris’s first worry seems to be that in deciding consistency based on psychological rather than nominal factors, it comes too easily; i.e. standards of psychological consistency are underdetermined by situational *or* personality variables. One can *always* construct a standard, tell a story, according to which one’s behavior is cross-situationally consistent. But because this is always possible, it is never interesting.³⁹ But Russell (rightly) responds that there is no reason to think that the sort of psychological consistency he and Mischel are after is anything so weak or arbitrary as this. Rather, it is rooted in sound personality psychology, and not any *ad hoc* storytelling about motives. As Russell says, “When the question is the content of someone’s personality, his consistency with respect to *those* processes...is hardly something that the situationist can regard as cheap. For the purposes of *that* question, what other standard could there be?”⁴⁰

There is, however, a point in defense of Doris here that Russell does not consider: in moving to consider the psychological or internal or motivational factors at play in consistency, the impetus is to include the *subject’s* perspective in our evaluation of the situation. As Russell says (borrowing from Mark LeBar), “what look like ‘random turns’ to an ‘objective’ observer may actually belie considerable order and consistency, *if* we consider them from the agent’s point of view.”⁴¹ It is not clear, however, that by importing personality theory as our new evaluative criteria, this is what we have done. Rather, the perspective involved in assessing one’s cross-situational patterns of cognitive-affective processing is still the *third* person. In other words, Russell has not actually left the nominal perspective for the psychological; indeed, the latter seems for him a subcategory of the

³⁶ See Nancy E. Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence*.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 300.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 303-4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 304.

former. Doris's reconstructed worry, then, still stands: if one wishes to evaluate cross-situational consistency along internal, first personal lines, then one must deal with the *ad hoc* problem. I'll return to this point in my second and third arguments below.

But what of Doris's second worry, that "such consistency" as one gets from personality psychology "would not match the normative standards of a virtue theory anyway"? In other words, even if we can get psychological consistency, we *need* nominal consistency in order to call the result "virtue," since to have a virtue is presumably to act in a certain way across situations regardless of how one might be personally inclined to act. Russell examines three possible ways of responding to this problem. The first is to opt for a "commonsense" view of character that is distinct from both dispositionist and situationist views and so avoids their problems.⁴² Second, one might say that a virtue just is whatever psychological attribute happens to underlie cross-situationally consistent behavior that is judged as morally good, and leave the problem of figuring out the empirical details to the psychologists. And third, one could "adopt a cognitive-affective conception of personality and of consistency," and say that a virtue happens when one's "own standard of consistency is also a normatively adequate one."⁴³ This last is Russell's own preferred approach, and he develops it at length in the book. He discusses the first two approaches in some detail as well, ultimately dismissing them for reasons which I cannot discuss in detail here. In sum, he finds both approaches empirically inadequate, though for different reasons. The first approach is plagued by a common tendency among commonsense, "folk psychological" views (a tendency which is apparently immune to education) to overestimate the importance of character factors and underestimate the importance of situational factors. The second approach fails because of the possibility of disparate psychological processes giving rise to apparently consistent *observed* behavior. As Russell says,

...because nominally consistent behavior may well be caused by disparate psychological factors, we cannot define virtues in terms of the nominal consistency of behavior...Remarkably, we find that no theory of the virtues can be empirically adequate if it makes the thesis that 'an action is right just in case it is what a virtuous person would do' come out as a truism!⁴⁴

We are thus left with Russell's third way: accepting the standards of consistency given to us by the personality psychologists, and attempting to make them match the normative standards of virtue theory. A full discussion of Russell's proposal here is outside the scope of this paper, but it is enough to mention that for our purposes, it does not matter whether these personality traits overlap with virtue norms often enough to be reasonably considered candidates for the sort of global character traits for which virtue ethicists are looking. Admittedly, this is an interesting issue, fraught with complexities of its own, but none of my arguments below turn on it. Rather, I want simply to reiterate a point that Russell does not dispute but takes pains to *defend*: that any cognitive-affective processing-based standard of consistency requires the involvement of a robust conception of practical intelligence in the possession and exhibition of any virtue.

⁴² Ibid., 305.

⁴³ Ibid., 306.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 322.

§2: The Practical Intelligence Defense

Having surveyed some prominent attempts by virtue theorists to overcome the philosophical situational critique, what I have been calling the “practical intelligence defense” should by now be familiar. Grouping together the tendencies among the authors we have surveyed, as well as others,⁴⁵ the PID can be stated thus:

Practical Intelligence Defense (PID) – Virtue theory can be reconciled with (or even predicted by) situational empirical psychology if we interpret virtues as primarily involving some form of practical intelligence. The PID is characterized by a focus on the “internal” mechanisms or properties of dispositional tendencies, and the importance of how meaning is construed for the subject of given situations. The claim is that, once this perspective is taken up, the situationist critique can be seen to be misguided, since some aspect(s) of this internal perspective is sufficient to ground the sort of cross-situational consistency required by virtuous character traits.

I will now offer three arguments against the PID.

Argument 1

Let us grant the claim common to PID theorists that the relevance of situationist psychological experiments to virtue ethics cannot be assessed until we have incorporated the first-person perspective into our deliberations about cross-situational consistency. Even granting this, I do not think many self-ascribed virtue theorists will be comfortable thereby ignoring behavioral dispositions altogether. Just as right action without proper motivation is not virtue, so good intentions without behavioral output is not virtue, but incontinence. At best, then, it seems we are constrained to say that *both* psychological processing factors *and* behavioral dispositions are necessary conditions for virtue. But if this is the case, then it seems that the situationist psychological evidence leaves us with one of two positions. Either:

1. People are cross-situationally consistent in their psychological processing, but this comes apart from their behavior when subjected to situational variation, or
2. People’s psychological processing mechanisms are consistent with their behavioral output, but their processing is itself cross-situationally inconsistent.

But of course neither option is amenable to a list of classic virtues as reliable, cross-situationally consistent character traits. This amounts to a *modus tollens*: If a virtuous character trait is exhibited, then it will involve both internal (cognitive-affective) and external (behavioral) cross-situational consistency; people do not in fact display both internal and external cross-situational consistency at a statistically significant rate; therefore, virtuous character traits are not exhibited in statistically significant ways. Note that this argument

⁴⁵ See fn. 4.

undercuts the appeal to internal psychological factors, unless one is willing to abandon the importance of any behavioral regularity for virtue.

Argument 2

In order to be argumentatively useful, the PID must avoid being either trivial or *ad hoc*. By trivial, I mean that one may not appeal to a capacity of practical intelligence so broad that simply engaging in a reasoning process (whether reflective or perceptual or what have you) about one's situation counts as "cross-situationally consistent behavior." On such a criterion, almost any rational processing mechanism by which some situational features are rendered salient for consideration in behavioral motivation—regardless of *what* those features are or *why* they are so rendered—will count as "rational" and therefore as candidates for a standard of consistency.⁴⁶

On the other hand, the version of practical intelligence one appeals to must avoid being so specific as to be *ad hoc*. I.e., one may not stipulate that whatever cognitive-affective situational processing mechanism that constitutes practical intelligence just does result in virtuous action, so that "virtue" becomes synonymous with "reasoning to whatever is the virtuous behavior in a given situation." This is both because, as Russell points out, any theory which makes the 'right action/virtuous person's action' relation a truism cannot be empirically adequate, and because to make this claim is essentially to beg the question against the philosophical situationist, who maintains that virtue, if it exists, is a function of both cognitive-affective processing and behavior, and that these are in principle (and often in practice) separable. Thus, the proponent of the PID needs a middle path to applying practical reason across situations. Unfortunately, this possibility is limited by the fact that the reasons for behaving "virtuously" are widely divergent, divergences which track situational differences. For example, disparate dispositions are often classed under the same "virtue" heading, such as "courage" exhibited on the battlefield and "courage" exhibited at the bedside of a sick loved one; "honesty" exhibited in telling the truth to a friend, and "honesty" exhibited in refraining from stealing from a stranger; or "generosity" exhibited in donating blood to a blood bank, or "generosity" exhibited in giving Christmas gifts to one's children; etc.

What these sorts of examples illustrate is that in the search for a capacity capable of grounding the needed cross-situational consistency of global character traits, appeal to a *reasoning* process is already on somewhat shaky footing, owing to the almost infinite potential complexity of reasons in diverse situations. John Doris and Stephen Stich make a similar point when they say,

What reasons we respond to depends on how we "code" our environment, and this coding is itself highly dependent on environmental factors. Reason-responsiveness, then, is likely to be no less situationally variable than is overt behavior."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ This horn of the dilemma I am constructing bears significant resemblance to John Doris's initial worry discussed by Russell and myself above.

⁴⁷ John Doris and Stephen Stich, "Moral Psychology: Empirical Approaches," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/moral-psych->

Another way of putting the point is that in order for a proposed phronetic capacity to ground the needed cross-situational consistency, it must be capable of discerning between disparate kinds of available *reasons* for behavioral consideration, marking some as salient, and motivating action that is sensitive to the changing dynamics of situations; but in order to do *this*, it must appeal to some prior rational capacity (some *pre-practical* intelligence)—and from here the road to a vicious infinite regress is not far. The idea here is that there is no principled and non-arbitrary way to pick which patterns of reasoning should fall under “practical intelligence” and so serve as indicators of cross-situationally consistent traits.

Argument 3

There also remains a skeptical worry. In her book *Self-Knowledge*, Brie Gertler discusses the possibility of privileged epistemic access to one’s own mental states. In attempting to narrow the field of mental state types about which such a claim might plausibly be made, Gertler cites Nisbett and Wilson’s 1977 study⁴⁸ which suggests that people often engage in *post-hoc* rationalization about their motivations, and so lack privileged access to “the reason that actually shaped their choice.”⁴⁹ Gertler also cites Benjamin Libet’s famous 1985 experiment,⁵⁰ concluding that the accumulated evidence indicates “that at least some of our actions are caused by factors that are unconscious or subpersonal, and hence inaccessible by introspection.”⁵¹ But what about conscious mental states? Might those be good candidates for privileged access? Gertler here quotes from Timothy Wilson:

My decision to get up off the couch and get something to eat...feels very much like a consciously willed action, because right before standing up I had the conscious thought “A bowl of cereal...sure would taste good right now.” It is possible, however, that my desire to eat arose nonconsciously and cause my conscious thought about cereal and my trip to the kitchen.⁵²

The idea here is that the causal relations between one’s thought and one’s action are not directly accessible to one; they are, rather, as Ryle long ago pointed out (with Dennett following), a matter of *post-hoc* theorizing, and as Gertler says, “If one must resort to theorizing in order to grasp one’s own states, one does not have privileged first-person access to them.”⁵³ Combine this with the finding that people tend to be bad at accurately self-reporting their evaluative motives, particularly where character traits and their own happiness is concerned (so-called “affective forecasting”),⁵⁴ and given the wide divergence in

emp/>. They add, “However plausible or implausible, the focus on practical rationality is unlikely to diffuse the empirical issues, since there is *more* empirical work suggesting difficulty with familiar conceptions of reason than there is making trouble for familiar notions of character.”

⁴⁸ Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson, “Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes,” *Psychological Review* 84 (1977): 231-59.

⁴⁹ Brie Gertler, *Self-Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 72.

⁵⁰ B.J. Libet, “Unconscious Cerebral Initiative and the Role of Conscious Will in Voluntary Action,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 8 (1985): 529-66.

⁵¹ Brie Gertler, *Self-Knowledge*, 73.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

reasons possible under any virtue-behavior-type, we see that PID does not rule out the possibility of rationalizing narrativization of one's psychological motivations, either on the part of the subject or on the part of the experimenter/philosopher. So long as this remains a likely possibility, one is left with a competing skeptical interpretation of the empirical situationist data.

And this gives rise to a possible fourth argument type, one that I can only hint at here. Assuming that what we have said so far is correct, one could construct a Bayesian probability argument for the skeptical interpretation of the psychological data over the virtue theorist's interpretation. This could be strengthened by looking at experiments with large random samples, such as the Milgram experiment and its repetitions, and would involve showing that given the low probability of the sort of statistical regularities observed in these studies, a skeptical hypothesis will normally be explanatorily superior to a hypothesis which posits a cause of the regularity within the subjects themselves. One could appeal to the so-called "Likelihood Principle," a principle of epistemic probability according to which an observation (in this case, the statistical regularity of seemingly vicious behavior in random samples of people) counts as evidence in favor of one hypothesis (in our case, the skeptical hypothesis) over another (the virtue theoretical hypothesis, with proper adjustments for PID concerns) if the observation is more probable on one hypothesis than on the other.⁵⁵ This argument would seek to show that given the prior low probability of the observed regularity, the virtue hypothesis is less likely than the skeptical hypothesis, owing to the random sampling of presumably virtuous and non-virtuous people.

Given these reasons to doubt the core intuition guiding most recent responses to the philosophical situationist critique, and the possibility of new styles of skeptical argumentation from the empirical psychological data, I conclude that situationism remains a formidable threat to virtue theory.

⁵⁵ See Elliot Sober, "Bayesianism – its scope and limits" in Richard Swinburne (ed.), *Bayes's Theorem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 21-38. The Likelihood Principle is derivable from the "odds form" of Bayes's Theorem: $P(h1|e)/P(h2|e) = [P(h1)/P(h2)] \times [P(e|h1)/P(e|h2)]$.