

Challenging Caricatures of Character:
Practical Wisdom and the Person/situation Debate

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Milgram's (1974) obedience trials, Hartshorne and May's (1928) studies on honesty, and Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973) pushed many psychologists and philosophers to question traditional notions of character (Benjamin & Simpson, 2009). Many social psychologists and philosophers such as Walter Mischel (Mischel & Shoda, 1995), John Doris (2002), and Gilbert Harman (2000, 2007) abandoned unified character as empirically unnecessary in explaining behavior. They look instead towards situational factors, meriting the nickname "situationists". Situationists call on a host of other experiments conducted by social psychologists to support the superiority of situational explanations of behavior over character-focused explanations (e.g. Anderson, 1989; Asch, 1956; Baron & Bell, 1976; Darley & Batson, 1973; Isen & Levin, 1972; Latané & Darley, 1968). In light of this empirically backed critique, it has become almost taboo to speak of character as a source of behavior in a meaningful way.

Building on Blaine's exposition of the situationist argument, I contend that situationists' conclusions about character are unwarranted as they are based on a body of empirical literature that is deeply flawed and incorrectly interpreted. Additionally, situationists proceed on a faulty understanding of character that pits character in opposition to situational forces, leading them to erroneously conclude that character does not exist. Aristotle's (1999) theory of virtue is illuminating in dispelling the dichotomy often imposed by situationists between situations and character. Aristotle argues that *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, is central to understanding the interaction between situations and character. In this presentation, I argue that *phronesis* makes it clear just how artificial the dichotomy is between situation and character. I detail three main components of *phronesis*: moral perception of the situation (*krisis*), deliberation (*bouleusis*), and

reasoned choice (*prohairesis*). These three components highlight several flaws in the interpretation and application of situationist social psychology. I conclude by discussing potential applications of *phronesis* to the study of character and virtue in psychology, offering an empirical avenue for studying character.

Practical Wisdom

Aristotle defined practical wisdom as *orthos logos*, or correct moral reasoning in relevant situations (Fowers, 2005). Practical wisdom guides the virtuous individual in determining which virtue is called for by a particular situation. Because practical wisdom entails the enactment of one or a few virtues depending on the specifics of the situation, possessing practical wisdom entails having at least some form of the various other virtues; otherwise, it might not be possible to choose the most virtuous action. Hence, practical wisdom is not an esoteric set of rules but the application of the virtues by the virtuous person to the particulars of his or her life (Noel, 1999). It is “having virtue internalized in a non-codified way” (Sherman, 1997, p. 284) and is particularly important in helping the virtuous individual know how to act in situations that seem to call for competing virtues. For these reasons, some have referred to practical wisdom as the “master virtue” (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006), a nickname with which Aristotle is likely to have agreed.

Moral Perception

Practical wisdom starts in the way a virtuous person perceives the situation. Aristotle (1962) contends that each person is responsible for how he or she construes a situation (p. 67). Perception is not something that happens to us but is something in which we actively engage. A virtuous person will have a characteristically distinct way of appraising the situation that accurately indicates what form virtuous action will take. Thus, this initial perception can itself be

seen as an indicator of character (Sherman, 1989). Virtue itself is crucial to the moral perception of a situation. A virtuous person will be alert to more opportunities for virtuous action than a non-virtuous person. For example, a person who is kind is more likely to perceive situations where kindness is relevant than a person who is not. For this reason, a life of virtue is a necessary context for practical wisdom.

Properly trained emotions play an intricate role in helping the virtuous individual correctly perceive the situation. Often times, an emotional reaction can be the first indicator of the moral nature of a situation and can further serve to indicate which aspects of the situation are most relevant. For example, my initial repulsion in watching a neighbor scream at her baby may tell me there is something wrong in the situation and help me pinpoint my source of discomfort on the unjust treatment of the infant. In this way, properly trained emotions can be valuable guides to virtuous behavior. Aristotle believed that for emotions to be characteristic of virtue, they need to be felt towards the right people, in the right way, at the right times (*orthos logos*). Thus, practical wisdom entails emotions that respond to situational calls for virtue.

Although situationists may agree that perceiving a situation as morally relevant is an important precedent to behavior, the research they rely on systematically neglects this claim. Take, for example, Darley and Batson's (1973) Good Samaritan experiment. In it, the researchers observed whether Princeton seminarians would help a man slumped over in a doorway, half of whom were experimentally induced to rush to another building on campus. As expected, Darley and Batson found that the majority of rushing seminarians did not stop and that non-rushing seminarians were more likely to help. In their analysis, Darley and Batson elided the question of moral perception, not taking into account whether the seminarians considered the

slumped-over man as needing help. Without an understanding of the seminarians' moral perception of the situation, it is impossible to draw conclusions about their character.

Deliberation

When moral perception indicates the salient aspects of a situation, deliberation or *bouleusis* follows. Deliberation is always undertaken in the context of an identified good or goal. Aristotle (1992) famously said, "Those who have no goal before them are in no position to deliberate" (p. 31). Indeed, the virtuous person's commitment to virtuous action indicates a pre-choosing of goods or goals. In this context, deliberation is not deciding which end to pursue but rather what the best way is to pursue that end. In much of virtuous action, the actions undertaken to pursue a good are constitutive of their respective ends. Thus, deliberation is not simply determining the most effective means to use to achieve the desired end but is rather understanding the nature of the good being pursued so as to know how best to pursue it.

Understanding deliberation illuminates the flaws of a rule-based approach to virtuous action or morality. Because virtuous action is responsive to the situation, it will never be completely fixed or determinate as such an approach would seem to suggest. For example, in many large cities in the United States, homeless people walk the streets asking passers-by for money. In the journey to and from work, a virtuous person could easily come across two or three people asking for money each day. If this virtuous person was struggling to support his or her own family it may actually be foolish to give out money. In this situation, deliberation would be essential to decide how best to realize the virtue of generosity. Deliberation would take into account the financial resources and life situation of the virtuous person as well as others' needs.

Many situationist studies underestimate the role of deliberation in virtuous action. Typically, situationists assume that a virtuous person would help at any opportunity and that if a

person does not help, he or she must not be virtuous. There is a substantial literature on the effects of situations on volunteerism and donation that is based on this assumption (e.g. Cunningham, Steinberg, & Grev, 1980; Guéguen, 2011; North, Terrant, & Hargreaves, 2004; Weyant, 1978). Because situationists typically do not understand the role of deliberation in virtuous action, they expect the virtuous person to inflexibly donate or volunteer. However, contrary to situationist assumptions, deliberation may at times appropriately lead a person not to volunteer or donate. These social psychology experiments are consequently mis-taken as evidence of the non-existence of virtue when in fact they are not indicative of character.

Rational Choice

The final element of practical wisdom is *prohairesis*, or reasoned choice. The etymology of *prohairesis* links it with both moral perception and deliberation: “Choice (*prohairesis*) is a taking (*hairesis*), but not without qualification—a taking of one thing before (*pro*) another; that is not possible without examination and deliberation. So choice, comes from deliberative belief” (Aristotle, 1992, p. 30). Reasoned choice is the logical result of accurate moral perception and successful deliberation. *Prohairesis* differs from other kinds of choice in that *prohairesis* is related to the virtue of the agent, expressing the agent’s character (Sherman, 1989). Character is thus expressed by a virtuous person choosing to act virtuously based on his or her desires rather than acting out of obligation or duty. Reasoned choice involves choosing a course of action that is most in line with virtuous aims and often involves choosing between conflicting virtues based on the situation at hand.. For example, you may find out that your elderly neighbor has been unjustly claiming disability compensation to make ends meet because he has not been able to find a job in the difficult economy. Here, honesty would seem to recommend reporting the fraud,

while benevolence seems to urge ignoring it, at least for now. Reasoned choice is necessary to decide how to best act virtuously in situations like this.

Situationists frequently disregard the role of reasoned choice in practical wisdom by failing to recognize that many virtuous decisions are not clear cut. Many of the situationist social psychology experiments reflect this disregard by not considering alternative explanations when people do not engage in helping behavior. In the literature on the situational factors involved in helping, participants are put in a situation where a pre-determined form of helping is assumed to be the virtuous response. This involves actions such as mailing a letter, picking up dropped pencils, or stopping to help someone on the side of the road in car trouble (Latané & Dabbs, 1975; Levin & Isen, 1975; Mallozzi, McDermott, & Kayson, 1990). If participants fail to act in the specified manner, they are often assumed to lack virtue or character. Situationists' expectation that virtuous people will always help denies the possibility that there may be conflicting aims that might make it inappropriate to help in a particular circumstance. Situationists systematically fail to account for these potentialities in their explanations and therefore base their conclusions that people lack virtue on empirically shaky ground.

In sum, practical wisdom is composed of three interacting parts that indicate critical flaws in the situationist understanding of character. Moral perception of the situation involves an individual's construal of a situation as virtue-relevant, without which, virtuous action cannot occur. Situationists typically overlook an individual's construal of the situation, assuming that participants view the situation in the same way as the experimenter. Deliberation is the process by which an agent selects between appropriate ways to act virtuously. Situationists characteristically misunderstand deliberation and assume virtuous action to be fixed. No room is given for a virtuous person to pursue virtuous ends in a flexible manner. Rational choice is the

culmination of practical wisdom and involves agents acting in a manner expressive of their virtuous nature. Situationists do not account for rational choice by failing to realize that ends sometimes conflict, calling for a virtue that does not fit into the researcher's pre-determined scheme.

Empirical Application

A good understanding of practical wisdom leads to several empirical recommendations. To begin, a properly informed study must take a participant's construal of the situation into account. Without an understanding of how the situation is morally perceived by the participant, the researcher will not be able to generalize results to the character of the participant. Several critics have pointed this out (Badhwar, 2009; Kamtekar, 2004; Kupperman, 2001; Ross & Nisbett, 1991), but their call goes largely unheeded. Moral perception of the situation is an important moderating variable in participants' response to the situation. At the least, the experimenter should ask participants how they construed the situation.

A well-conducted study will also measure character correctly. This measurement is likely to involve multiple measurements of an individual across time. Social psychologists need to remember that virtuous action is not fixed. As such, a single behavior taken alone is never fully representative of character, but should be understood in the context of a person's life.

Deliberation reminds us that a virtuous person will not act routinely but will seek the best way to actualize a particular virtue, and reasoned choice indicates that virtuous action should stem from a characteristically virtuous person. Thus, repeated measures are necessary to understand how an individual's behavior is indicative of his or her character. Fleeson's (2001, 2007) use of daily diaries to measure personality seems to be an especially promising technique to understanding

character. Once character is understood in this more thoroughgoing way, individual acts can be more concretely related to the character of an individual.

An experiment conducted following these suggestions would avoid the dichotomy assumed by situationists and offer additional insights into character. Furthermore, this exploration of *phronesis* illustrates that in order for the study of character to be meaningful, it will need to rely on more well-founded theoretical conceptions of character.

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