

Virtue Ethics and Moral Psychology

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G. E. M. Anscombe outlined in her seminal article, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, the needed work to be done on human psychology in order to further our ethical discourse.¹ This work, focused on what motivates, limits and allows us to act morally has progressed massively in the last 60 years, especially in the last 20 years.² The works of Martin Seligman and Christian B. Miller especially have focused on virtue and character, expanding the empirical literature considerably.³ From this empirical work I would like to suggest that virtue ethics describes human morality in the most coherent fashion, and should be considered as a strong ethical theory, even from a Deontological and Consequentialist point of view. Humans seem to be driven by previous thoughts and habits, rather than consistent rational thinking which both Deontological and Consequentialist traditionally presuppose. A fostering of these habits, into virtues, can consistently, although not robustly, direct the moral behaviour of an individual. Situationism is often used to attack this.⁴ It interprets experiments, such as the Milgram experiment or the Sandford Prison Experiment, to suggest that circumstance is the largest determining factor when it comes to moral action. I would like to suggest that this is partly true but does not at all detract from virtue ethics. In the situationist literature, there are still individuals that did not follow the majority and acted with more moral character. Critics of virtue ethics will take this to show that even if virtue ethics exist in some form, it is rare, and thus fails to be a strong normative theory.⁵ I will respond to this in two ways, first by outlining that rarity

¹ G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): pp. 1-19, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0031819100037943>, 18.

² Naomi Ellemers et al., "The Psychology of Morality: A Review and Analysis of Empirical Studies Published From 1940 Through 2017," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 23, no. 4 (2019): pp. 332-366, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868318811759>, 13.

³ See Christian B. Miller, *The Character Gap: How Good Are We?* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), and Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: a Handbook and Classification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴ Candace L. Upton, "Virtue Ethics and Moral Psychology: The Situationism Debate," *The Journal of Ethics* 13, no. 2-3 (2009): pp. 103-115, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10892-009-9054-2>, 105 -106.

⁵ Upton, "Virtue Ethics and Moral Psychology", 108-109.

does not imply failure, and secondly the importance of situation in forming character, and how we can use that in forming more virtuous individuals. Further, these studies typically outline human behaviour in extreme or new cases. Studies that do track character in less extreme and familiar situations do show a correlation between character and moral action. From this I aim to present an interactionist account of virtue, one in which our character is shaped by our situation (and how we reflect upon it) and our response to situations are impacted by our character.

Any moral theory, if it is attempting to be descriptive in any sense, ought to care about human psychology. One cannot possibly be asked to live under a moral obligation that they psychologically cannot act on. Virtue ethics, out of the three main theories found today, outlines the best understanding of human motivation and capability. That is due to its focus on the individual, and how one acts from situation to situation. That is not to say Deontology or Consequentialism do not stand as moral theories, or ought to be replaced by virtue ethics. Rather, I would suppose that they could implement some degree of virtue and character into their theory as a means towards their own ends.⁶ A Consequentialist could easily adopt virtue ethics in order to further bring good to the most people, and a Deontologist could easily adopt virtue ethics in order to help an individual follow out their duty consistently. They are not incompatible. For the purpose of this essay I will be adopting a view of virtue and character similar to the one outlined by Christen Miller. For Miller, virtues are reliable. They serve as a predictive pattern for an individual.⁷ This differs from classic virtue ethics, in that it does not outline a system in which all actions, bad or good, are to be sourced in character. Instead, one can typically expect a person to act according to a virtue they have consistently, but there will be exceptions. Certain situations, for example, can lead a person to acting in a way that does not seem to be sourced out of an individual's character. For many, this is a serious problem for virtue ethics. Often, critics of Virtue ethics – like John Doris – cite studies such as the Milgram experiment or other situationist literature to outline the flaws in virtue ethics as a normative moral theory.⁸

⁶ Mary Crossan, Daina Mazutis, and Gerard Seijts, "In Search of Virtue: The Role of Virtues, Values and Character Strengths in Ethical Decision Making," *Journal of Business Ethics* 113, no. 4 (2013): pp. 567-581, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-013-1680-8>, 569.

⁷ Christian B. Miller, *The Character Gap: How Good Are We?* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 10.

⁸ Valerie Tiberius, *Moral Psychology: a Contemporary Introduction* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 115-117.

Although there has been some considerable research to show in many situations, an individual is largely shaped by their environment regarding moral action, these studies fail to track people from situation to situation. The studies that do track an individual's moral actions across situations tend to show the importance of character in moral decisions.⁹ For example, those who are rated as having a strong moral character,¹⁰ often are found to be judged as having Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (behaviour considered to be moral), whilst those with weaker moral character are often judged to have Counterproductive Work Behaviour (behaviour considered to be immoral).¹¹ These studies outline a different situation than what most situationist claim are the case. This is due to the focus on character instead of situation. Several other studies also show that character does play a role in making moral decisions.¹² Secondly, the situationist literature fails to explain for the difference between individuals with in the studies themselves. For example, in the Milgram experiment, thirty-five percent of the participants did not reach the final stage.¹³ What is the cause of this difference? If the situation is the same across the board, it seems likely the individuals, and their character had something to do with it.

Yet if our character can easily be bypassed by certain situations (that is, for the majority of people), is perusing Virtue ethics as a moral theory worthwhile? The fact that we seem to have weak moral inclinations (especially in certain situations), outlines the answer: yes. Just because a moral theory is not implemented well within society, does not mean it will not work. It seems, rather, that we need to implement means in which we can strengthen our moral character on a larger scale. Already I've shown that there is a clear relationship between character and moral behaviour in the workplace. This can be fostered. Using an interactionist model in which situation and character are both considered, one can strengthen their moral character through the situations they put themselves in, thus becoming more morally resilient across all situations. Mary Crossan, Daina Mazutis, and Gerald Seijts do exactly this in their paper, *In Search of Virtue: The Role of Virtues, Values and Character Strengths in Ethical Decision Making*.¹⁴ They

⁹ Taya R. Cohen and Lily Morse, "Moral Character: What It Is and What It Does," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2443685>, 68-69.

¹⁰ Cohen and Morse, "Moral Character," 13. This study used a number of personality and moral models to get a good grasp on moral character. These are similar to what Miller and Seligman outlined in their work.

¹¹ Cohen and Morse, "Moral Character," 11-12.

¹² Cohen and Morse, "Moral Character," 35.

¹³ Tiberius, *Moral Psychology*, 116.

¹⁴ Crossan, "In Search of Virtue", 567.

outline a system in which an individual may strengthen moral character.¹⁵ This “value-based orientation”, as Crossan labels it, includes both situational pressure and personal values, traits and virtues.¹⁶ From this they offer a view that includes both situation and character, in which an individual can self-reflect on a situation, in turn shaping character, which will impact future moral action in different situations. A model like this explains the startling findings in the Milgram experiment rather well. Without prior experience in a moral situation of that found during the Milgram experiment (or similarly the Stanford Prison Experiment), an individual will act according to whatever familiar situational guide they can find – in both cases it was the authoritative figure behind the experiment. The situation in which they were put in gave them very little time to reliably reflect on what they were doing, and instead those tested went with the clear moral action, from their perspective, that is respect of authority. Evidence of this is found by looking at an interview from the original Milgram experiment. Joseph Dimow points to his failure to go further in the experiment “to a suspicion of authority born out of early experiences in political and military organizations.”¹⁷ Virtues, thus can act as a “buffer” against situational pressures that may lead to negative outcomes.¹⁸ Adopting a theory outlined by Mary Crossan, Daina Mazuits, and Gerald Seijts in larger scale could easily provide a strong framework from which individuals could practice moral growth, and thus become more virtuous agents across many more situations.

With the considerations and evidence outlined above, virtue ethics clearly has a role to play when attempting to act morally. Even from a Deontological or Utilitarian point of view, the massive impact virtue ethics could have on an individuals moral decision making ought to be considered. Although the way that we have come to understand character, virtue, and the role these play in ethical situations has largely changed since Aristotle, virtues are still consistent, reliable, and cross-situational factors when it comes to moral decisions making The situationist critique, rather than pose a threat for virtue ethics, refines it and outlines the need for a stronger implementation within society. Self-reflective, integrationist models, such as the one proposed by Crossan, can serve as a means in which virtue can be fostered within an individual, ideally leading to a society where people are more resilient to the bombardment of situational pressures.

¹⁵ Crossan, “In Search of Virtue”, 568.

¹⁶ Crossan, “In Search of Virtue,” 573.

¹⁷ Crossan, “In Search of Virtue,” 575.

¹⁸ Crossan, “In Search of Virtue,” 575.

Yet even if that does not occur, virtue ethics is clearly not irrelevant on a personal level, and still serves as a strong moral theory for any individual seeking a more ethical life.

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