

Virtues as Qualities of Character:
Alasdair MacIntyre and the Situationist Critique of Virtue Ethics

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ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades, a growing philosophical literature has subjected virtue ethics to empirical evaluation. Drawing on results in social psychology, a number of critics have argued that virtue ethics depends upon false presuppositions about the cross-situational consistency of psychological traits. Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* has been a prime target for the situationist critics. This essay assesses the situationist critique of MacIntyre's account of virtue. It argues that MacIntyre's social teleological account of virtue is not what his situationist critics take it to be. Virtues, for MacIntyre, are not reducible to psychological traits. They are qualities of one's socially constituted character, and their intelligibility as virtues derives from their role in the narrative of one's life. Recognizing this both clarifies and complicates debates about the implication of situationist social psychology for virtue ethics.

KEYWORDS virtue, character, Alasdair MacIntyre, Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, empirical psychology, situationism

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I. Introduction

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the return to prominence of virtue ethics in both moral philosophy and religious ethics. One important feature of virtue ethics, emphasized by a number of its twentieth-century defenders, is its ability to bridge the notorious is-ought distinction, uniting description and evaluation through thick descriptions. Yet while this feature of virtue ethics is attractive to many, it also makes virtue ethics potentially vulnerable to empirical critique in a way that other approaches to ethics are not. In recent decades, drawing upon results in social psychology, a number of "situationists" have argued that virtue ethics depends upon psychological

presuppositions that are empirically false.¹ In particular, virtue ethics presupposes the existence of stable, cross-situationally consistent psychological traits. The existence of such traits, the critics contend, does not stand up under empirical scrutiny. If these criticisms are correct, talk of virtue turns out to be misleading at best and even potentially dangerous. It leads us to make false assumptions about both our own moral capacities and those of others. It also leads to fundamentally misguided programs of moral formation. Virtue ethics, the critics conclude, must be either radically revised or discarded.

The primary targets of the situationist critics are Aristotle and contemporary Neo-Aristotelians. The use of empirical psychology to critique virtue ethics began two decades ago and has quickly generated a substantial literature in moral philosophy. Unlike moral philosophers, however, religious ethicists have generally paid little attention to the situationist critique. Christian Miller, a leading philosopher in the field of empirical studies of character, writes that there has been “almost uniform silence” on the topic from theologians and theological ethicists (2016, 49).² Yet the implications of the situationist critique are no less important for religious ethics than moral philosophy. The influence of Aristotelian virtue ethics on the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions is immense and ongoing. Indeed, the return of virtue ethics in moral philosophy is in significant part due to the influence of Catholic philosophers like Elizabeth Anscombe, Peter Geach, and Alasdair MacIntyre. While these religious ethical traditions tend to be more capacious than Neo-Aristotelianism – appealing not only to virtue, but also, for example, to covenant, law, and grace – their virtue traditions are similarly vulnerable to the challenges arising from empirical psychology. If

¹ The name comes from the idea that it is not the character of the agent but features of the situation that primarily determine behavior. It is an empirical thesis about human personality and behavior. It should not be confused with “situation ethics” associated with Joseph Fletcher.

² One exception that Miller notes is Andrew Kim 2013. Miller’s point is about Christian ethics, but it can be generalized to most scholars of religious ethics. There are some important contributions from Confucian virtue ethics. See Slingerland 2011 and Richard Kim 2016.

human beings are empirically incapable of the virtues, the ethical teachings of many religious traditions may require radical revision.

One of the most influential figures in both religious and philosophical virtue ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre, has been a prime target of the situationist critics. MacIntyre's *After Virtue* is regularly cited as an example of an approach to virtue ethics that relies on false empirical presuppositions about human psychology. The standard passage cited as evidence for this is the following:

From an Aristotelian standpoint to identify certain actions as manifesting or failing to manifest a virtue or virtues is never only to evaluate; it is also to take the first step towards explaining why those acts rather than some others were performed...Indeed without allusion to the place that justice and injustice, courage and cowardice play in human life very little will be genuinely explicable (2007, 1999).

This passage is quoted early in John Doris' *Lack of Character* (2002) and repeatedly in Mark Alfano's *Character as Moral Fiction* (2013). From the claim that virtues and vices explain behavior, Doris and Alfano conclude that MacIntyre's account of virtue requires the existence of stable, cross-situationally consistent psychological traits. Empirical psychological results that challenge the existence of such traits also challenge the psychological foundations of MacIntyre's virtue ethics.

This essay challenges the situationist critique of MacIntyre's account of virtue in *After Virtue*.³ There are two reasons I choose to focus on MacIntyre's account of virtue. The first is the scope of its influence, especially in religious ethics. The second is the fact that MacIntyre's understanding of virtue is importantly different from that of most contemporary Neo-Aristotelians. In particular, MacIntyre defines virtue in relation to the social and historical context of social practices, communities of accountability, and moral traditions. While MacIntyre was not yet a Thomist in *After Virtue*, the key role he gives to tradition in *After Virtue* set the agenda for his subsequent work, the result of which was his conviction that he could be a better Aristotelian by

³ I focus on *After Virtue* both because the critics do and because it provides MacIntyre's most worked out account of virtue. I will also seek to situate in the larger development of his thought.

becoming a Thomist. One result of my argument will be that the same feature of MacIntyre's thought that provides the best response to the situationist critique – namely, the way he defines virtue in relation to social practices, communities of accountability, and moral traditions – is also a key factor in his return to Catholic moral theology. This suggests that the potential empirical inadequacy of contemporary philosophical virtue ethics may stem from the attempt to defend virtue abstracted from the embodied and communal resources provided by religious and other traditions.

I will not argue that MacIntyrean virtue ethics requires no modification in light of the results of empirical psychology. I will argue instead that the critics have not adequately grasped what a virtue is for MacIntyre. In doing so, I hope to show that virtue ethics is more complex than assumed by many of its situationist critics. Even if empirical results do ultimately fail to support the existence of stable, cross-situationally consistent psychological traits, we do not yet have a sufficient reason to abandon MacIntyre's construal of the Aristotelian virtue tradition, a tradition that includes Jewish, Christian, and Islamic branches. The results of empirical psychology do matter for ethics, especially approaches to ethics centered on virtue. The challenge, which is confounded by the difficulty of bringing together ill-fitting conceptual schemes, is determining *how* they matter. My primary answer in the present essay is negative: they do not matter in quite the way the situationists claim. The positive contribution lies primarily in the conceptual clarity pursued. Nonetheless, I will in the course of the argument make some tentative suggestions about how to rethink the implications of empirical psychology in relation to MacIntyre's account of virtue.

I begin in the following section with a very short description of what I take to be the central challenge to virtue ethics posed by the results of empirical psychology. I draw in particular from the work of John Doris and Mark Alfano, the two thinkers who have been most critical of MacIntyre on this front. The third section then turns to MacIntyre and outlines the main features of his three-stage account of virtue found in *After Virtue*. In the fourth section, I develop my claim that the

situationist critics have failed to adequately grasp MacIntyre's account of virtue. I argue that MacIntyre's conception of character and virtue is thoroughly social and historical and cannot be reduced to psychological categories. The fifth section further elucidates the difference between MacIntyre's account of virtue and that attributed to him by the situationist critics by addressing Alfano's attempt to develop an empirically adequate account of virtue. I argue that MacIntyre not only anticipates Alfano's turn to a picture of virtue as partially constituted by social relations but has already developed a more promising social ontology of virtue. Finally, I draw some limited conclusions about contemporary virtue ethics and the value of empirical psychology for moral formation.

II. The Challenge of Situationism

In the two decades since Gilbert Harman and John Doris began citing psychological research to raise problems for virtue ethics, empirical psychology has become a major force in moral philosophy.⁴ The psychological research is rapidly developing, as is its philosophical reception. I make no effort here to canvass the relevant philosophical or psychological literature. I simply aim to give a basic picture of the situationist critique of virtue ethics.

A growing body of psychological literature⁵ suggests that human behavior exhibits little cross-situational consistency and displays striking sensitivity to small situational changes.⁶ In fact, some studies find that subtle situational factors are more important in predicting behavior than the personality or character of the actor (Nisbett and Ross 2011, 3-4). What is particularly striking about

⁴ Doris's earliest article on virtue and psychology was in 1998. He followed it with *Lack of Character* in 2002. Harman began his criticism of virtue ethics with an article in 1999.

⁵ Two landmark books in this literature are Walter Mischel 1968 and Lee Ross and Richard Nisbett 2011. For an extensive bibliography, see Christian Miller 2014.

⁶ There are of course difficult problems regarding the meaning of cross-situational consistency. Many have argued that the lack of consistency across situations depends on construing them nominally (i.e. by external features). The story is different when the situations are construed by psychologically salient features. I am passing over this nuance because it is not important to this paper. See Miller 2014, ch 1.

the situational sensitivity of human behavior is that the most important factors are often not those we expect; indeed, they are often factors that the agents themselves hardly recognize. Alfano divides the primary situational factors that have been shown to influence behavior into two major categories: bad reasons and situational non-reasons. Bad reasons are factors that agents themselves might recognize to be reasons for their behavior, but that are obviously not the salient moral reasons in the situation: the commands of an experimenter as a reason to shock an unwilling victim, punctuality as a reason to ignore a suffering man, the presence of bystanders as a reason not to intervene to protect a victim of violence.⁷ Situational non-reasons are more insidious.⁸ These include such things as noise level, smell, lighting, and, mood (2013, 40-50). Each of these factors has been shown to have a surprisingly high statistical impact on the behavior of individuals. What makes situational non-reasons particularly problematic is that they appear to shape behavior below the level of consciousness.

Beginning in the 1960s, a group of social psychologists, appealing to the low-cross situational consistency found in human behavior and the surprising power of subtle situational factors, began to challenge common assumptions in personality theory (Mischel 1968; Nisbett and Ross 2011). Human behavior, they argued, does not display the consistency required by the dominant understanding of personality, particularly its reliance on stable, cross-situationally consistent traits.⁹ Behavior seems rather to be shaped more by the situation than any feature of the person. Their claim was not that people do not display consistency in their behavior. That would obviously be false. In similar situations, individuals do seem to display consistent behaviors over time. Their claim, rather, was that the range of situations in which this is true is much narrower than

⁷ I am here referencing a few famous experiments. For details, see Ross and Nisbett 2011, ch. 2; and Doris 2002, ch. 3.

⁸ Alfano may be wrong to call them ‘non-reasons.’ While they operate subconsciously, they do often provide reasons of a sort (e.g. mood maintenance). I owe this point to Christian Miller. See Miller 2013, part II.

⁹ Personality psychology has obviously been evolving since these criticisms began. But the theories of personality prior to the rise of situationism, at least according to Ross and Nisbett, relied on the same intuitions about traits as we do in everyday trait attributions. See Ross and Nisbett 2011, ch. 4.

assumed in personality theory because behavioral consistency requires situational stability. By disrupting the situational stability of everyday life in their experiments, these social psychologists demonstrated that they could produce surprising deviations in behavior.

Situationist social psychology developed largely as a critique of personality psychology, not virtue ethics. Virtues and vices, however, look a lot like stable, cross-situationally consistent personality traits, and the critique of the latter began to catch the attention of moral philosophers interested in the former. John Doris and Gilbert Harman were the earliest philosophers to appeal to social psychology in order to critique virtue ethics. Virtues and vices, according to Doris, can be included among the traits subject to the situationist psychological critique (Doris 2002, 19-20).¹⁰ If empirical psychology shows that the vast majority of people lack what Doris calls “global” personality traits – that is, robust and cross-situationally consistent traits – then they also lack virtues and vices as they have been understood in the Aristotelian tradition. Instead, most people have a much more fragmented collection of “local” traits and narrow dispositions that exhibit little evaluative integration (Doris 2002, 62-66). The problem for virtue ethics, Doris rightly notes, is not that the vast majority of people seem to lack virtue; Aristotle would certainly not find that surprising. The problem is that they seem to lack the consistency of character necessary for either virtue or vice. In this way, the psychological critique of personality theory is applied by situationist philosophers to virtue ethics in the Aristotelian tradition. The result, according to Doris and Alfano, is a conclusive reason for thinking that neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics relies upon psychological assumptions are empirically inadequate.

¹⁰ Cf. Miller 2014, ch. 1. Doris does recognize some difference between a personality trait and a virtue. After outlining the primary commitments of both virtue ethicists and personality psychologists – which, he says, include the situational and temporal robustness of traits – Doris claims that these two discourses “exhibit substantial affinities” (2002, 19). Still, he wants to “take a bit of care over the differences.” He goes on: “Character traits appear to have an evaluative dimension that personality traits need not; for example, the honest person presumably behaves as she does because she values forthrightness, while the introvert may not value, and may in fact disvalue, retiring behavior in social situations.” But having raised this difference, Doris quickly dismisses its importance, saying that all that matters for his purposes is that both moral virtue and psychological personality presume behavioral consistency (2002, 20).

Why should this matter? It matters for moral theory because it entails that virtue ethicists are building a moral theory on non-existent entities. Alfano defends an error theory of virtue language. There are also important practical implications. Moral education frequently seeks to inculcate character traits. If the situationists are right, such approaches to moral education are pursuing the impossible. In addition, belief in virtues and other robust traits shapes our assumptions about ourselves and others. If I believe you are courageous, I will make assumptions about your behavior. If I believe courage is a cross-situationally consistent trait, I will make assumptions about how you will respond to new situations. I will also make assumptions about my own moral abilities in the face of new situations. The situationist findings suggest that such assumptions will often turn out to be mistaken. There are, therefore, important theoretical and practical considerations at stake in assessing situationist claims.

III. MacIntyre on Character and Virtue

Sweeping arguments about the failures of entire traditions of thought must rely on criticisms aimed at the shared features of many individual positions. The danger is that by criticizing everyone, the critic fails to attend adequately to the position of anyone in particular. Both Doris and Alfano risk this danger. Rather than analyzing what individual thinkers take virtues to be, they assume that whatever a virtue is, it must be some variant of a psychological personality trait – even if a morally valenced and particularly intelligent one – and thus subject to the same empirical criticism. There is no doubt an important function for such sweeping criticisms, and practical considerations will always prevent them from engaging particular texts in depth. Moreover, the similarity between virtues and personality traits is quite plausible, and many do think of virtues as psychological dispositions. Doris and Alfano offer us good reasons to worry about simply assuming the existence of stable, cross-situationally consistent psychological dispositions. Yet as Elizabeth Anscombe pointed out in “Modern Moral Philosophy,” the article often credited with reviving virtue ethics, it is

by no means clear what a virtue is (Anscombe 1958). There are different accounts of the nature of virtue, even among neo-Aristotelians. As it turns out, a quite different account is offered by one of the primary targets of the situationist critique, Alasdair MacIntyre. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre spends two chapters developing a detailed, three-stage account of virtue. Each stage requires a unique conceptual background, and each later stage presupposes the former. I begin with an overview and before turning to what is of particular salience to situationism.

The first stage of MacIntyre's account of virtue is built on the background concept of a practice. A practice, for MacIntyre, is

[a]ny coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (2007, 187).

A practice is a very broad notion, and it encompasses both social roles with well-defined standards of excellence and appropriately complex forms of activity, including “arts, sciences, games, politics in the Aristotelian sense, [and] the making and sustaining of family life” (188). The breadth ensures that a great deal of human life is spent engaging in practices.

One aspect of the definition of a practice in particular need of elucidation is that of a good internal to a practice. MacIntyre distinguishes goods internal to practices from external goods (188-91). The latter are those goods that one may achieve through excellence in a practice, but that are in principle separable from the practice. Typical examples are money, fame, and power. Internal goods, by contrast, are those goods that cannot be had except through participation in a particular practice. MacIntyre gives an example of an effort to teach a gifted seven-year old to play chess (188). The child has no interest and can only be lured into playing with the promise of external goods (candy for playing and extra candy for winning). The hope is that the child will eventually discover the internal goods of chess and come to be motivated by the pursuit of these. So long as the external

goods are all the child is after, cheating in order to obtain more candy will be tempting. Once child comes to value the goods internal to chess, the temptation to cheat will be diminished by the fact that cheating will preclude the achievement of internal goods. For the most complex and life-embracing practices, the internal goods will include the good of a particular kind of life spent engaging in the practice (190).

This notion of a practice permits MacIntyre to formulate his first “partial and tentative” definition of a virtue: “A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods” (191). Because practices are socially established cooperative forms of activity, the virtues primarily concern the way in which individual practitioners relate to one another. Every practice will, for example, have certain standards of desert. In order to engage in a practice well, one must recognize these and act accordingly. To fail to do so is not necessarily to fail to achieve excellence in the characteristic activities of the practice, but it is to fail to stand in the relation to others necessary to achieve the goods internal to the practice (191-92).¹¹

This first-stage definition of a virtue is obviously insufficient in a variety of ways. Of particular importance for MacIntyre is the fact that it does not allow an account of how the internal goods of different practices are to be related to one another and to external goods such that conflicts can be rationally adjudicated (201-03). A life characterized by the virtues of several practices is not yet a good life as long as it lacks a mode of rational integration. This problem provides the impetus for the development of the second stage of his account of virtue. At this stage

¹¹ MacIntyre clarifies: “It is no part of my thesis that great violinists cannot be vicious or great chess players mean-spirited. Where the virtues are required, the vices also may flourish. It is just that the vicious and mean-spirited necessarily rely on the virtues of others for the practices in which they engage to flourish and also deny themselves the experience of achieving those internal goods which may reward even not very good chess-players and violinists” (193). This is worked out in terms of the distinction between a practice and a technical skill (193-94), which I will not discuss here.

the question becomes: In what does the unity of a single human life consist (203)? A genuine virtue, MacIntyre recognizes, cannot be practice-specific. Yet to attribute to someone a virtue that exceeds a practice is to conceive of her life as a united whole across the many activities in which she engages. For MacIntyre, “the unity of a virtue in someone’s life is intelligible only as a characteristic of a unitary life, a life that can be conceived and evaluated as a whole” (205).

For the tradition of the virtues, according to MacIntyre, the unity of a human life is to be understood as the unity of a narrative. The argument for this position begins with the nature of human action. MacIntyre argues that intelligible action is a more basic category than action as such and that intelligibility requires narrative (208-09). To fully understand a human action is to be able to order an agent’s intentions and situate them in their proper settings (e.g. roles, practices, milieus) as well as the histories of those settings. An action is not an individual behavior that later comes to have meaning when interpreted in narrative terms; rather, an action just is an episode in a possible narrative and history (208). MacIntyre extends the same argument to the concept of a person. He criticizes the efforts of Locke and Hume to understand personal identity in terms of the continuity of psychological states or events. Personal identity must also be understood in terms of narrative: “Just as a history is not a sequence of actions, but the concept of an action is that of a moment in an actual or possible history abstracted for some purpose from that history, so the characters in a history are not a collection of persons, but the concept of a person is that of a character abstracted from a history” (217).

The unity of a life is the narrative unity of a character. Yet to say that the unity of a human life is that of a narrative is not to say that we are the sole authors of our own lives. Our stories begin *in media res*. We find ourselves already situated in settings such as practices, social roles, and relationships, each with its pre-existing expectations and demands. The expectations and demands of

others are not merely the raw material out of which individual narratives emerge. Being answerable to others in this way is partially constitutive of what it is to be a unified character:

[W]hat is crucial to human beings as characters in enacted narratives is that, possessing only the resources of psychological continuity, we have to be able to respond to the imputation of strict identity. I am forever whatever I have been at any time for others – and I may at any time be called upon to answer for it – no matter how changed I may be now. There is no way of *founding* my identity – or lack of it – on the psychological continuity or discontinuity of the self. The self inhabits a character whose unity is given as the unity of a character (217).

Social practices of imputation are not practices of recognizing a strict psychological unity. Practices of imputation constitute a unity for which one must learn to answer.

The narrative unity of a life is the conceptual background for the second stage of MacIntyre's account of virtue. The narrative of an individual life can be understood as the narrative of the ordered or disordered pursuit of various internal and external goods. The rational integration of a life involves continually asking and answering the question of what constitutes a good life. This question arises from the recognition of the conflicts and incompatibilities between various internal and external goods, and the systematic attempt to answer it sets one on a quest for a good life as a whole. Such a quest is not the pursuit of a fixed object but a search for that which only becomes clear in the pursuit itself (218-19). The virtues, at this second stage, are those qualities that not only enable us to pursue goods internal to practices but also “sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good” (219).

The background concept of the third level is that of a tradition. I will only briefly describe this level because it is less important to my purposes and less developed in *After Virtue*. The concept of a tradition is crucial because it embeds practices, social identities and moral communities in a larger social and historical narrative (221). By recognizing the dependence of our lives and practices on a tradition, we see that the good is pursued collectively. Moreover, as arguments about the good

extended through time, traditions provide both the context and the conditions in which particular visions of the good life can be rationally tested and defended. The “point and purpose” of virtues is here extended beyond practices and individual lives to include “sustaining those traditions which provide practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context” (223). The viability of traditions depends upon the virtue of their adherents, and the rational pursuits of the adherents depend on the ongoing vitality of their traditions.

MacIntyre develops his account of tradition at length in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988), the work that also marks his conversion to Christianity. In his next major work, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990), he develops and extends his position and identifies himself as a Thomist. The conversion to Thomism has important implications for MacIntyre’s thought. Nonetheless, it does not change the basic structure of the account of virtue outlined above. When MacIntyre covers the same ground in his most recent book, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* (2016), he continues to situate his account of virtue in relation to social practices, communities of accountability, and moral traditions. Moreover, narrative continues to perform the same key function in the constitution of the identity of the subject of the virtues and the integration of the goods of various practices – even as he notes that his use of the category of narrative is “moving beyond (some Thomists would say away from) Aquinas” (229). The primary difference is that MacIntyre now emphasizes that a successful narrative will be oriented to a final end beyond all finite goods (230-31).

IV. Character, Virtue, and Personality Traits

It is, I suspect, already apparent that the situationist critics are at least partially talking past MacIntyre. I want now to try to specify how MacIntyre’s account of virtue differs from the assumptions of these critics. Two points in particular have to be stressed. The first is that MacIntyre develops a quite sophisticated account of virtue acquisition that begins with the development of very

narrow and contextually-limited capacities. Virtues, for MacIntyre, have their origin, both developmentally and conceptually, in practices. It is particularly important to see how practices train individuals in concepts that must be mastered in virtue acquisition. Any virtue will require mastery of certain key concepts (e.g. the concept of desert or a lie). These concepts are, for MacIntyre, embedded in the social practices and traditions in which human life is lived. While these concepts can be discussed abstractly and rationally defended, one can only master them concretely as one learns to use them in practice. Children learn the meaning of courage or justice by learning what is required to inhabit various social roles (e.g. daughter, brother, friend) and to participate in other sorts of practices (e.g. games, sports, arts). Notice that MacIntyre seems quite literally to be talking about the kind of “local virtues” that Doris considers empirically well-founded but insufficient for virtue ethics (Doris 2002, 62-66).¹² We could think of such simple virtues as playdate justice (e.g. taking turns, sharing goods) and soccer courage (e.g. putting your body between the ball and an oncoming player, not moving when standing in a wall in front of a direct kick). My four-year-old daughter has no conception of justice as such, but she does recognize the difference between what is owed to her friends, what is owed to her teacher, and what is owed to her parents.¹³ This, for MacIntyre, is the stuff of the first stage of virtue.

While virtue begins with “local” dispositions, it cannot end there. Virtues must extend to the whole of one’s life. MacIntyre is much more careful about this extension than the critics notice. Virtues are not assumed to manifest themselves in all contexts after having been formed in one context. One reason, again, concerns the role of concepts in virtue acquisition. Because concepts are

¹² Doris does not include practices or social roles in his discussion of local traits. His point is simply that behavior is generally consistent when two situations are similar. Many practices are a natural fit for the idea of local virtue. Others, such as virtues specific to social roles, do not fit quite as naturally. Nonetheless, since the notion of a local trait is supposed to explain why people do generally have consistent character, it does seem that important social roles (e.g. mother, friend, employee) provide the situational stability that allows us to behave in a consistent manner – at least when these relationships are psychologically salient to our construal of the situation.

¹³ Alfano criticizes reliance on such narrow dispositions, calling it an ‘extreme retreat.’ This would be true if MacIntyre’s account ended here. See Alfano 2013, 64-67.

embedded in social practices, the concepts on which practice-specific virtues depend are themselves practice-specific. Their extension thus requires a larger conceptual home in which virtue concepts can be located and reinterpreted. This is the work of the narrative unity of a life as a quest for the good.

The point about virtue concepts is crucial, and it largely explains why MacIntyre could not just assume that traits formed in one context would be relevant to another. But in addition, MacIntyre has psychological reasons for avoiding simplistic assumptions about the applicability of context-specific dispositions to new situations. Following Derek Parfit, he recognizes that our psychological continuity from one moment (and situation) to the next is never a matter of strict identity of states. How, then, do we achieve the unity of a self? MacIntyre, as we have seen, argues that the unity of the self depends upon the fact that others attribute to us strict identity across situations and hold us at all times answerable for whomever we have been. He writes:

[A]sking for and giving of accounts itself plays an important part in constituting narratives. Asking you what you did and why, saying what I did and why, pondering the differences between your account of what I did and my account of what I did, and *vice versa*, these are essential constituents of all but the very simplest and barest of narratives. Thus without the accountability of the self those trains of events that constitute all but the simplest and barest of narratives could not occur; and without that same accountability narratives would lack that continuity required to make both of them and the actions that constitute them intelligible (218).

There is here no presupposition that the stability of psychological dispositions itself renders one's activities cross-situationally and temporally consistent. If we achieve the narrative unity necessary for virtue, it is due to the imputation of strict identity and our ongoing accountability to others.

One might worry at this point that I am conflating two worries about psychological continuity. One, which MacIntyre is explicitly addressing, is about the psychological continuity of a self over time (i.e. how I may or may not be the same person with the same traits at some later date). The other is the situationist worry, which is not about continuity over time but about consistency across situational differences. Cross-situational consistency is importantly different from temporal

continuity. I recognize this distinction, as well as the fact that MacIntyre does not have the latter view in mind. Nonetheless, MacIntyre's response to the former has important implications for the latter. His move away from the psychological unity of the self to the unity of a character requires a reinterpretation of cross-situational consistency as well.

To explain this, I turn now to the second point, which goes to the heart of the matter. Although MacIntyre is working in the Aristotelian virtue tradition, he makes some important departures from Aristotle. Of particular importance is the fact that he develops a "socially teleological account" of virtue in contrast to Aristotle's biologically teleological account (197).¹⁴ This is clear from his reliance upon the teleological structure of the social categories of practice and character, but its importance has not been adequately recognized by the situationist critics. For MacIntyre, one cannot understand what a virtue is until one understands the subject to which virtue is attributed. He does a great deal of philosophical work to answer the question: what is the subject of the virtues? The subject of virtues, he concludes, is an enacted character, which is constituted by a narrative forged through relations of accountability that attribute strict identity. The crucial point for my purposes is that character is not for MacIntyre merely a psychological concept. Indeed, MacIntyre's concept of character is developed as an *alternative* to a concept of selfhood founded on psychological unity. And if the subject of the virtues is not merely a psychological subject, then the virtues are not merely psychological traits. The virtues, rather, are qualities of character.

What does it mean to say that the virtues are not merely psychological traits but qualities of character? For MacIntyre, "the unity of a virtue in someone's life is intelligible only as a characteristic of a unitary life," namely, a narratively-construed character (205). This means that the unity of a virtue over the course of one's life is not a psychological or statistical unity; it, too, is a

¹⁴ MacIntyre has since decided that he cannot do entirely without an account of the importance of biology for virtue ethics, but this shift does not change his commitment to the social teleology of *After Virtue*. See the preface to MacIntyre 1999. He has also argued more fully that Aristotle, too, has a social teleology. See, for example, MacIntyre 2016.

narrative unity. In *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, covering the same territory on identity, accountability and the unity of a life, MacIntyre writes: “Accountability for particular actions and projects cannot be entirely independent of accountability for one’s life as a whole, since the adequate characterization of some actions and projects, and these not the least important, depends in part upon how the whole life is to be understood and characterized” (1990, 197). The same must be true about virtues and vices: how one’s traits are to be characterized depends upon how the whole of one’s life is to be characterized. Whether or not one possesses a virtue is an interpretive judgment regarding the whole of one’s character construed narratively through time. Aristotle thought it was difficult to determine whether or not someone was happy prior to death – or even shortly after (Aristotle 1999, I.10). MacIntyre’s account suggests that the same may be true of the possession of a virtue.¹⁵ This, of course, does not mean we cannot discuss the virtues of the living. Attributions of virtue and vice, after all, are often a matter of praise and blame, and this certainly need not wait until one’s death. But even in the case of incomplete narratives, attributions of virtue function to construe one’s character in a particular way, to make interpretive claims regarding the way the various parts of one’s story hold together. Moreover, attributions of virtue for the living have an important function in relations of accountability. Recall that for MacIntyre “I am forever whatever I have been at any time for others” (217). Talk of virtues and traits, then, has an important role in setting the expectations of others and thereby, through relations of accountability, of stabilizing one’s character over time.

MacIntyre’s conception of virtue, then, entails a different account of the unity of a virtue than that of the situationists. For the situationists, the unity of a global trait, if there were such a thing, would be found in the cross-situational consistency of its behavioral expressions. Psychologies

¹⁵ MacIntyre never says this. I am simply trying to draw out the implications of his account of virtue for the situationist challenge. There is no need to think that we cannot attribute virtue prior to death, but his account does seem to entail that it a final judgment about a virtue in a person’s life must wait until the story is complete.

tend to measure this by picking out isolated individual actions and then making statistical calculations. For MacIntyre, as I have argued, the unity of a virtue is a narrative unity. These two types of unity are quite different. Of particular importance is the fact that narrative unity, unlike cross-situational consistency, is compatible not only with difference but also with change over time. The consistency of a virtue in different situations depends not necessarily on the exhibition of similar behaviors but on the possibility of narrative integration.¹⁶

MacIntyre contrasts this robust account of the virtues of character with what he thinks became of the virtues after the background concepts of a practice with internal goods and the narrative unity of a life faded from view in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A new way of understanding the place of the virtues in human life was needed. That new way, according to MacIntyre, was to understand them as “dispositions related... to the psychology of that newly invented social institution, the individual” (228). It is this modern psychological picture of virtue, MacIntyre’s argument suggests, that sets the terms of the debate surrounding situationism. This picture is also often falsely attributed to MacIntyre himself.

Having defended the claim that virtue and character are not merely psychological concepts for MacIntyre, let me now offer some careful qualifications. I am not making the entirely implausible claim that virtues and vices have nothing to do with individual human psychology. By denying that they are psychological concepts, I am denying that they map onto the kinds of traits studied in personality theory – that is, traits which serve in particular types of causal explanations and which give rise to a behavioral regularity that can be described statistically (that is, by the relative likelihood of trait-relevant behavior). But clearly individual psychological capacities, in a general sense of that term, are integrally connected to virtue and character. MacIntyre himself does not hesitate to

¹⁶ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this way of contrasting narrative unity and cross-situational consistency.

commit himself to certain presupposition about individual psychological capacities. In *After Virtue*, he notes that while the unity of a life is not founded on psychological continuity, it does presuppose some degree of psychological continuity (218). In *Three Rival Versions*, he expands the list of what his account of character presupposes about human beings: “the uninterrupted existence of human bodies from conception to death, the relative, although far from complete continuity and reliability of memory, the relative stability of certain character traits, the stability and endurance of recognition abilities, and the fact of a variety of communally shared understandings and beliefs” (1990, 198). At this point, the threat of empirical inadequacy reemerges, as it should. The situationists are right to hold moral theory accountable in its empirical commitments. And note that MacIntyre lists “the relative stability of certain character traits” among his presuppositions. Does this mean his account is empirically inadequate after all? Perhaps, though I do not think the situationists have shown it. But it is important to see how the analysis offered above forces us to rethink the empirical questions at stake. The empirical question that is important for MacIntyre is not whether or not psychological traits manifest themselves in cross-situationally consistent behavior. The question, rather, is this: Do we have sufficient psychological capacities – not in isolated settings but as members of communities of mutual accountability – to pursue goods in a manner that integrates our various pursuits into a unified project of living well? This is an importantly different empirical question, for it switches focus from the cross-situational consistency of trait expression to the capacity to rationally unify one’s pursuits. Whether or not one attains the virtues depends on whether or not one develops the capacity for the latter.

If this interpretation is right, then the situationist critics have failed to adequately attend to MacIntyre’s account of virtue. By assuming a virtue must be a “global” psychological trait on the model of a personality trait, these critics have read a picture of virtue into *After Virtue*. Yet, we must ask, if MacIntyre does not conceive of a virtue on the model of a personality trait, how are we to

understand his bold assertion, which I quoted in the introduction, about the explanatory power of the virtues and vices? For this, one must put the frequently repeated quotation back in context. A central feature of MacIntyre's project is to show that "every moral philosophy has some particular sociology as its counterpart, that is, a picture of how its account of moral agency could be socially embodied" (23, 225). His account of virtue, as we have seen, relies on a social teleology and thus a particular way of construing the social world. Of particular importance is the dynamic he develops between practices and the institutions that sustain them (e.g. international soccer and FIFA; graduate education and the university). In this way of construing the social world, the virtues have a very well-defined role in the maintenance of practices and their relationship with institutions. They also have a function in sustaining traditions. MacIntyre does indeed have explanatory commitments regarding the relationship between traditions, institutions, practices, and virtues (196), but it is nowhere implied that this has anything to do with predicting which kinds of actions individual will perform in isolated experiments. All explanations of human action are a matter of narrative construal, for narrative history is "the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions" (208). Psychological experiments shift the genre from narrative history to predictive, statistical, and causal categories. This sort of psychological experimentation is not what MacIntyre is addressing.¹⁷

One clear indication that MacIntyre's understanding of the explanatory function of the virtues and vices is at odds with the explanatory paradigm of social psychology can be found in the entire chapter of *After Virtue* that MacIntyre devotes to a critique of the social sciences, one aim of which is to expose their lack of predictive accuracy. He makes clear, however, that his critique is not of the social sciences as such, but of the way they have been understood and of their ideological function in the legitimation of certain forms of authority in modern society. The true achievements of the social sciences, he argues, are concealed by their ideological misinterpretation. There is no

¹⁷ See also Philip Reed 2016.

doubt that MacIntyre does think the social and psychological sciences have made important contributions. MacIntyre writes in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* that “both Aristotle’s sociology and psychology badly need to be corrected and developed” by drawing on the achievements of modern sociology and psychology (221). His psychological example is the work of Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky on characteristic human biases and errors. Indeed, MacIntyre writes that “no education into the virtues, into the qualities needed for practical rationality, is now complete which is not informed by their work” (191-92). A similar point might be made about the work of the social psychologists who have taught us about the surprising influence of subtle situational factors. As long as we do not reduce virtues to psychological traits, these results need not be seen as incompatible with virtue ethics. Instead, these results provide us with deeper insight into the characteristic sources of human practical error as we seek to unify our lives in the rational pursuit of the human good. Education in the virtues ought to take account of these findings and seek new kinds of awareness of the influence of situational factors and perhaps even new virtues that correct these characteristic human errors.

V. Moral Character and Factitious Virtue

I will now further elucidate the relationship between MacIntyre and the situationist critique by briefly comparing MacIntyre’s account with Mark Alfano’s constructive proposals regarding virtue. In his book, *Character as Moral Fiction*, Alfano argues that virtue ethics requires a set of psychological commitments that turn out to be empirically inadequate (2013, 35-61). Alfano does not think we must abandon virtue talk. Instead, he suggests that virtue attributions can function as a “moral technology.” Drawing on psychological research on the placebo effect and self-fulfilling prophecies, Alfano argues that virtue attributions may actually function to make virtue – or at least its semblance. He calls this “factitious” virtue, a word intended to blend the Latin root *factum* (made) with the “aural resemblance” of the word “fictitious.” Factitious virtues are “made” through

attribution but remain fictitious because they only mimic stable and consistent virtuous character traits (13).

Alfano argues that by attributing a virtue to someone – at least in the conditions of a plausible and public attribution to someone who correctly understands what the trait entails¹⁸ – we alter both the attributee’s self-concept and what others expect from her. The effect is that she is likely to act on her revised self-concept and the corresponding social expectations. She still does not have the trait or virtue, since there is no such thing. She does, however, exhibit a set of behaviors which “simulate traditional virtues without actually being those virtues” (101). At his more optimistic moments, Alfano even imagines a possibility, the reality of which has not yet been determined by empirical research, that one could eventually drop the “artificial supports” of self-concept and social expectations and continue to display virtuous behavior (103).

Alfano, I think, is exactly right to recognize the importance of the interplay of practices of attribution, self-conception, and social expectation. All these things are no doubt part of the story of human behavior and its relative stability. Indeed, the idea that we might develop apparent virtues in order to meet social expectations and garner social praise has a long history, dating back at least to Augustine’s criticism of Roman virtue as primarily for the sake of glory (Augustine 1950).¹⁹ Early modern Augustinians took this further, arguing that sin and self-interest can perfectly imitate virtue in the search for social approval. The path to virtue almost always begins with the pursuit of external goods, and there have been recurring worries that it may never move beyond this point (Herdt 2007). Alfano follows a similar path: we may act to uphold a positive self-concept or meet social expectations, but neither of these is a virtuous motive. Unlike the early modern Augustinians,

¹⁸ Alfano discusses these conditions and others on pp. 91-96.

¹⁹ A long tradition says Augustine called pagan virtues “splendid vices.” The term is not actually found in Augustine’s writings, but it is nonetheless quite fitting.

however, Alfano is relatively content with virtue's semblances. Factitious virtues, he writes, "are still pretty good" (105).

Alfano's primary argument is that factitious virtues can sustain some semblance of Aristotelian virtues. In the final section on moral virtue the argument takes on "a bolder, more revisionary spirit" (104). Most importantly, he tries to rethink the social ontology of virtue. For Neo-Aristotelians, he claims, virtues are "monadic dispositional properties." His argument about factitious virtue, by contrast, suggests that "it might be better to think of a virtue as a triadic relation among an agent, a social milieu, and an environment" (106). This would build social factors into the nature of virtue itself, thereby eliminating the worry that virtue attribution is a noble lie.²⁰ He offers this only as a revisionary suggestion for Neo-Aristotelians. If my reading of MacIntyre is correct, however, this suggestion no longer appears particularly bold or revisionary. For MacIntyre, not only are virtues partially constituted by their social worlds; persons are too. MacIntyre's social ontology of virtue is in fact more radical than Alfano's. Alfano's claim that Aristotelian virtue is achieved only when an agent is capable of dropping all "artificial" social supports may be true of some Neo-Aristotelian accounts of virtue, but it is certainly not true of MacIntyre's. In fact, the opposite is true for MacIntyre: it is not the social conditions of virtue and character that are artificial; it is the abstraction of virtue and character from their socio-historical context.

On Alfano's reading of Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, the social world of attributions and expectations is strictly speaking external to virtue. Virtue is an individual psychological trait that should operate consistently in any relevant context. For this reason, he sees factitious virtue as a fiction, a social construct in which the appearance of a non-existent trait is artificially sustained for non-virtuous reasons. Because this picture is quite dissatisfying, he suggests that we might rethink

²⁰ The worry is that if virtue attributions create virtue rather than recognizing it, virtue attribution is always false. But if virtue is defined to include the social factors that produce it, virtue attribution is not necessarily false. Alfano discusses this on pp. 101-04.

the social ontology of the virtues and conceive of them as relations between an agent, a social milieu, and an environment. I am suggesting that this is a misreading of Neo-Aristotelianism, at least in its MacIntyrean form. MacIntyre not only anticipates a social ontology of virtue but develops it in a more promising direction.

VI. Conclusion

I have argued that the situationist critique of *After Virtue* fails to prove what it claims, namely, that MacIntyre relies on psychological presuppositions that are empirically false. My argument, developed through a close reading of *After Virtue* and supplemented by MacIntyre's other writings, is that virtues are not, on MacIntyre's account, reducible to psychological traits, as the critics assume. Virtues are qualities of character, a notion that is explicitly developed as an alternative to the psychological unity of the self. Character takes the form of an enacted narrative, which is achieved as one learns to make one's life intelligible to oneself and, more importantly, to those others in one's moral community to whom one is accountable. Virtues will have a cross-situational unity, but not the unity of consistent trait expression. The unity of the virtues, like the unity of character, will be narrative unity, which means that it will be a unity that does not preclude difference and change but makes them intelligible. Nonetheless, the psychological findings to which the situationist critics appeal ought to convince us that those who would pursue the human good rationally must now develop new kinds of awareness of situational factors and perhaps even new virtues to correct the characteristic human errors illuminated by social psychology.

Let us conclude by noting that one thing this discussion of MacIntyre and his situationist critics helps us see is that an empirically defensible account of virtue may require us to avoid the abstractions characteristic of contemporary virtue ethics. Virtues may in fact be traits that find a place in lives shaped through social practices, communities of accountability, and moral traditions or not at all. This would not mean virtue requires robust religious traditions like MacIntyre's

Catholicism. Jeffrey Stout has argued quite compellingly that MacIntyre's social teleology can find application to moral communities and traditions that MacIntyre has not recognized as such (2001; 2004). Nonetheless, religious traditions remain among the richest sources of moral formation available, and it is not accidental that the author of *After Virtue* would find himself joining one of the great historic traditions of virtue. If the situationists are right that human beings lack the psychological capacity to develop cross-situationally consistent traits, we have an additional reason to follow MacIntyre in thinking that Neo-Aristotelian virtue requires the communities and traditions that provide the conditions for the achievement of a different sort of unity of the self. At the same time, religious ethicists and moral philosophers will have much to learn from social psychology about how human psychology makes us prone to particular kinds of moral errors and how traditions of virtue can incorporate these findings into moral education and ethical reflection.²¹

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