



Situationism and intellectual character education

*Alexandre Ziani de Borba**

Abstract: In this paper I want (1) to clarify the major situationists' claims in philosophy, (2) to reconstruct their major argument on the basis of these claims, and (3) to explore the ways in which situationism might threaten the status of intellectual virtue as an educational ideal. Section 1 introduces some empirical results that, together with the situationist exegesis of virtue theory, motivate a set of claims by situationists philosophers. Section 2 proposes that the major claims by situationists correspond to two pairs of descriptive claims, which I call 'global character skepticism' and 'positive situationism.' These two pairs together correspond to what might be called 'descriptive situationism.' On the basis of these two pairs of descriptive claims, I offer a reconstruction of the major situationist argument in the philosophical literature as well as a construction of one objection to intellectual character education raised by descriptive situationism, one which attacks the viability of such an educational project. Section 3 addresses the situationists' prescriptive program in philosophy. I characterize this prescriptive program as a pair of disjunctive prescriptive claims, namely, 'trait ascription revisionism' and 'deliberative situationism.' I then explore and construct two objections to intellectual character education raised by the situationists' prescriptive program in philosophy, which criticize, perhaps surprisingly, the very desirability of such an educational project.

Keywords: Consistency; Global Character; Intellectual Character Education; Situational Influence; Situation.

* Doutor em Filosofia pela Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (UFSM). Professor em Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (UFSM). E-mail: azdeborba@gmail.com. Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/2573981587490550>. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6814-1510>.

Situacionismo e educação do caráter intelectual

Resumo: Neste artigo eu pretendo (1) clarificar as principais alegações situacionistas em filosofia, (2) reconstruir seu principal argumento com base nessas alegações e (3) explorar as maneiras nas quais o situacionismo pode ameaçar o status da virtude intelectual enquanto um ideal educacional. A seção 1 introduz alguns resultados empíricos que, junto com a exegese situacionista da teoria das virtudes, motivam um conjunto de alegações por parte dos filósofos situacionistas. A seção 2 propõe que as principais alegações por parte dos situacionistas correspondem a dois pares de alegações descriptivas, as quais eu chamo de ‘ceticismo do caráter global’ e ‘situacionismo positivo’. Esses dois pares juntos correspondem ao que pode ser chamado de ‘situacionismo descriptivo’. Com base nesses dois pares de alegações descriptivas, eu ofereço uma reconstrução do principal argumento situacionista na literatura filosófica, bem como uma construção de uma objeção à educação do caráter intelectual que surge do situacionismo descriptivo, uma que ataca a viabilidade de um tal projeto educacional. A seção 3 aborda o programa prescritivo dos situacionistas em filosofia. Eu caracterizo esse programa prescritivo como um par de alegações prescritivas disjuntivas, nomeadamente, ‘revisionismo de atribuição de traço’ e ‘situacionismo deliberativo’. Eu então exploro e construo duas objeções à educação do caráter intelectual que surgem do programa prescritivo de situacionistas em filosofia, os quais criticam, talvez surpreendentemente, a própria conveniência de um tal projeto educacional.

Palavras-chave: Consistência; Caráter Global; Educação do Caráter Intelectual; Influência Situacional; Situação.

Situacionismo y educación del carácter intelectual

Resumen: En este artículo mi objetivo es (1) aclarar las principales afirmaciones situacionistas en filosofía, (2) reconstruir su argumento principal basado en estas afirmaciones y (3) explorar las formas en que el situacionismo puede amenazar el estatus de la virtud intelectual como ideal educativo. La sección 1 presenta algunos resultados empíricos que, junto con la exégesis situacionista de la teoría de la virtud, motivan una serie de afirmaciones por parte de los filósofos situacionistas. La sección 2 propone que las principales afirmaciones por parte de los situacionistas corresponden a dos pares de afirmaciones descriptivas, que yo llamo “escepticismo del carácter global” y “situacionismo positivo”. Estos dos pares juntos corresponden a lo que se puede llamar “situacionismo descriptivo”. Con base en estos dos pares de afirmaciones descriptivas, ofrezco una reconstrucción del principal argumento situacionista en la literatura filosófica, así como una construcción de una objeción a la educación del carácter intelectual que surge del situacionismo descriptivo, una objeción que ataca la viabilidad de la educación del carácter intelectual. La sección 3 aborda el programa prescriptivo de los situacionistas en filosofía. Caracterizo este programa prescriptivo como un par de afirmaciones prescriptivas disyuntivas, a saber, “revisionismo de atribución de rasgos” y “situacionismo deliberativo”. Luego exploro y construyo dos objeciones a la educación del carácter intelectual que surgen del programa prescriptivo de los situacionistas en filosofía, quienes critican, quizás sorprendentemente, la conveniencia misma de tal proyecto educativo.

Palabras clave: Consistencia; Carácter Global; Educación del Carácter Intelectual; Influencia Situacional; Situación.

Introduction

In this paper I want to clarify the major situationists' claims in philosophy (Sections 1, 2 and 3), to reconstruct their major argument on the basis of some of these claims (Section 2), and to explore the ways in which situationism might threaten the status of intellectual virtue as an educational ideal (Sections 2 and 3).

In Section 1 I briefly distinguish between three movements in the articulation of the situationist challenge, which corresponds, respectively, to psychological, moral, and epistemic situationism. After establishing the scope of the paper, I present some results of some representative studies of moral and epistemic situationism. I present a set of statements drawn from such studies, combined with the situationist exegesis of the Aristotelian tradition in virtue theory, which helps to characterize both moral and epistemic situationism.

In Section 2 I propose that the major philosophical situationists' claims correspond to two pairs of descriptive claims. On the one hand, there is a pair of negative descriptive claims. On the other hand, there is a pair of positive descriptive claims. These two pairs together correspond to what might be called 'descriptive situationism.' On the basis of these two pairs of descriptive claims, I offer a reconstruction of the major situationist argument in philosophical literature, and I explore and construct one objection to intellectual character education raised by descriptive situationism alone.

In Section 3 I begin to look to the situationists' prescriptive program in philosophy. Following Rodgers and Warmke (2015), I characterize this prescriptive program as a pair of prescriptive claims. On the one hand, there is a revisionist claim about our practice of trait ascription, which I call 'trait ascription revisionism.' On the other hand, there is a claim about a duty to attend more to situational features, as opposed to aiming at the cultivation of character traits, in order to be more effective in obtaining moral and epistemic improvement. I call this latter prescriptive claim 'deliberative situationism.' I then construct two other

objections to intellectual character education raised by the situationists' prescriptive program in philosophy.

Some representative studies of philosophical situationism

Situationism can be distinguished in three related, yet distinct fronts. Roughly, the first one, *psychological* situationism, is motivated by results from experimental psychological research and is associated with the theses that situational factors are overall better predictors of human behavior than characterological factors and that characterological factors are generally negligible in explaining and predicting human behavior. As a result of these theses, psychological situationism raises questions about the viability of the enterprise of personality psychology¹.

The second one, *moral* situationism, is an adaptation of psychological situationism in moral philosophy and moral psychology. Roughly, moral situationists think that, given the results from the situationist research tradition, the moral psychology to which virtue ethicists are committed with, particularly in the Aristotelian tradition, is psychologically unrealistic. In sum, if psychological situationism raises questions about the viability of the enterprise of personality psychology, moral situationism, by analogy, raises questions about the viability of the enterprise of virtue ethics.

The third situationist front is *epistemic* situationism, which is also an adaptation of psychological situationism in philosophy, but more particularly in epistemology. Analogously to moral situationism, epistemic situationism raises questions about the psychological plausibility of the characterological psychology to which responsibilists virtue epistemologists are committed with². Roughly, then, epistemic

¹ For a review of the Situationism in Psychology, see Miller, 2014, chap. 4.

² There is also a situationist challenge to virtue reliabilism, but I will ignore this challenge here since my main concern is with the viability and desirability of intellectual *character*

situationism raises questions about the viability of the enterprise of responsibilist virtue epistemology.

Since my interest here is in the growing *philosophical* literature on the situationist challenge, in this paper I will concentrate my analysis on moral and epistemic situationism, with a subtly greater interest for epistemic situationism since I want to articulate the ways in which situationism might threaten intellectual character education, another growing topic in epistemology. First, however, I want to present a summary of some representative studies of both moral and epistemic situationism.

There are many studies cited by situationists philosophers to endorse moral situationism. Fundamentally, the general idea of moral situationism (MS) can be presented such as follows:

(MS) (1') morally relevant conduct reliably covaries with morally irrelevant situational variables; (2') (1') reveals that there is a pervasive cross-situational behavioral variability which is best accounted by situational factors than by moral character traits; (3') (2') is evidence that there is no widespread possession of cross-situational consistent moral character traits in human population; (4') cross-situational consistent moral character traits correspond to the constructs of moral psychology posed by virtue ethicists, particularly in the Aristotelian tradition; (5') Aristotelian virtue ethics is committed with psychologically unrealistic assumptions about human moral psychology.

Many studies are cited as evidence for (1') and (2'). For instance, consider the following results: Darley and Batson found 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, while Matthews and Cannon found that subjects were 5 times more likely to help an

education. For an articulation of the situationist challenge to virtue reliabilism, see Alfano, 2013, chap. 6.

apparently injured man who had dropped some books when ambient noise was at normal levels than when a power lawnmower was running nearby³. The point here is that both passersby in a hurry or passersby not in a hurry and ambient noise at normal levels or ambient noise at high levels caused by a power lawnmower are *morally irrelevant situational variables*. However, if we take for granted the results of these studies, a morally relevant behavior – in both cases, helping or not helping – reliably covaries with morally irrelevant situational variables, apparently showing that a helping-trait or a disposition to help is *inconsistent across different situations*.

On the other hand, there are fewer studies cited by situationists philosophers in favor of epistemic situationism, at least as a challenge to responsibilist virtue epistemology. By far, the most paradigmatic studies are Asch's experiments on social conformity (ASCH, 1961) and Isen and colleagues' studies on how positive affect influence cognition (1987, 1991). For instance, Isen et al. (1987) discovered that subjects who see few minutes of a comedy film or receive a small bag of candy improve their performance on two tasks generally regarded as requiring creative ingenuity: the Duncker's candle task, and the Remote Associates Test. The situationist point here is that seeing few minutes of a comedy film or receiving a small bag of candy (both mood elevators, presumably) are *epistemically irrelevant situational variables* which has been found to influence epistemically relevant behavior. Mirroring (MS), epistemic situationism (ES) can be presented such as follows:

(ES) (1") epistemically relevant conduct reliably covaries with epistemically irrelevant situational variables; (2") (1") reveals that there is a pervasive cross-situational behavioral variability which is best accounted by situational factors than by intellectual character traits; (3") (2") is evidence that there is no widespread possession

³ See Merritt *et al.*, 2010, p. 357. The reason I take the results of these particular studies among many others will became clearer in the next section, where I clarify, following Alfano, 2013, some distinct kinds of situational influences.

of cross-situational consistent intellectual character traits in human population; (4") cross-situational consistent intellectual character traits correspond to the constructs of characterological psychology posed by responsibilist virtue epistemologists, particularly in the Aristotelian tradition; (5") Aristotelian responsibilist virtue epistemology is committed with psychologically unrealistic assumptions about human characterological psychology.

Taking (MS) and (ES) together, we came with what can be called, roughly, “philosophical” situationism (PS), which can be presented such as follows:

(PS) (1*) morally and epistemically relevant conduct reliably covaries with morally and epistemically irrelevant situational variables; (2*) (1*) reveals that there is a pervasive trait-relevant behavioral inconsistency; (3*) (2*) is evidence that there is no widespread possession of cross-situational consistent character traits in human population; (4*) cross-situational consistent character traits correspond to the constructs of characterological psychology posed by virtue theorists, particularly in the Aristotelian tradition; (5*) Aristotelian virtue theory is committed with psychologically unrealistic assumptions about human characterological psychology.

With (PS) in mind we are in a better position to look at the major situationists’ claims in philosophy and to see how they fit logically together.

Descriptive situationism and intellectual character education

Christian Miller states that “[T]here is no one position or set of clearly articulated claims which goes by the name of “situationism”, and

indeed I find the view very difficult to pin down" (Miller, 2014, p. 86). Miller was, apparently, talking about *psychological* situationism, but I think this is somewhat true for moral and epistemic situationism as well. There are many claims that situationists philosophers do, from negative to positive claims, both descriptive and prescriptive. The purpose of this section is, first, to address and clarify the major situationists' *descriptive* claims in philosophy. Secondly, given this previous clarification, I will reconstruct the major argument by situationists philosophers against virtue theory. Finally, given this major argument, I will show one way descriptive situationism might threaten the status of intellectual virtue as an educational ideal.

To begin with, I propose that the major situationists' descriptive claims in philosophy, taken together, forms what we might call 'descriptive situationism.' This is not an original classification since I am borrowing the term from Travis Rodgers and Brandom Warmke⁴. Following these authors, I propose a distinction between descriptive situationism and prescriptive situationism. Moreover, *descriptive* situationism, I propose, can be identified with two pairs of *descriptive* claims. On the one hand, there is a pair of *negative* descriptive claims which I call *global character skepticism*. On the other hand, there is a pair of positive descriptive claims which I call *positive situationism*. Let me clarify.

That situationism is a kind of character skepticism is something already suggested by looking at the titles of many texts advocating for situationism⁵. In this negative side of the descriptive situationist thesis, descriptive situationism is articulated as a challenge to virtue theory. Just like epistemological skepticism challenges epistemologists to vindicate the

⁴ See Rodgers & Warmke, 2015.

⁵ For instance, consider Harman's papers titled "The Nonexistence of Character Traits" (2000), "No Character or Personality" (2003), and "Skepticism About Character Traits" (2009), Doris' book named "Lack of Character", and Alfano's book named "Character as Moral Fiction".

widespread possession of knowledge by humans⁶, character skepticism challenges virtue theorists to vindicate the widespread possession of virtues and vices by humans. However, since descriptive situationism also offers positive descriptive claims, it cannot be reduced to a challenge. Descriptive situationists positively think *situational factors* are preponderant in explaining and predicting human behavior. To put it alternatively: on the one hand, moral situationists believe that morally relevant behavior reliably covaries with morally irrelevant situational variables, whereas, on the other hand, epistemic situationists believe that epistemically relevant behavior reliably covaries with epistemically irrelevant situational variables. This is the core of the positive side of the descriptive situationist thesis. Moreover, moral and epistemic situationists allow for the possibility of the widespread possession of *situation-indexed* stable traits. This latter position reveals that moral and epistemic situationists are not skeptical about *all* kinds of character traits but, more specifically, they are skeptical about character traits *not tied to specific situations* – which, as they read it, is the kind of characterological assumption to which Aristotelian virtue ethicists and responsibilist virtue epistemologists are committed with. To sum up, descriptive situationism is an amalgam of what are more properly labeled as *positive* situationism and *global* character skepticism.

Let me begin by global character skepticism. I propose that it can be properly characterized by the following pair of negative descriptive claims:

1. There is no widespread possession of global character traits in human population.
2. Ascriptions of global character traits are systematic errors of judgment⁷.

⁶ See Greco, 2010, p. 5.

⁷ For another, subtly different articulation of the same point, see Rodgers & Warmke, 2015.

Notice that the first claim is a claim about our actual characterological psychology, while the second claim is a claim about a presumably common practice among us, namely, the practice of ascribing *global* character traits to each other. Nevertheless, both claims share a skepticism about *global* character traits, meaning that descriptive situationism is a skeptical position about the widespread possession of character traits not tied to specific situations⁸.

Now, let me turn the attention to the positive side of descriptive situationism. I propose that this positive side can be properly characterized by the following pair of positive descriptive claims:

1. A sufficient portion of morally and epistemically significant human conduct is inordinately susceptible to seemingly trivial and normatively irrelevant situational influences⁹.
2. The large body of empirical evidence that supports the previous claims is compatible with the widespread possession of fragmented, local character traits (i.e., situation-indexed stable traits) in human population.

Although this second claim is consensual among situationists philosophers, only some of them are willing to endorse a “local trait theory”¹⁰. In respect to the first claim, it will be illuminating to consider Alfano’s classification of situational influences.

Alfano classifies situational influences in three kinds¹¹. First, there is the group of *bad reasons*, a group of situational influences which includes temptations and situational demand characteristics. Secondly,

⁸ This is to be contrasted to “local” character traits, i.e., character traits tied to specific situations. For more about the contrast between global and local character traits, see Doris, 2002.

⁹ The articulation of this claim is borrowed from Alfano, 2013.

¹⁰ For instance, DORIS, 2002, chap. 4, endorses it, but Alfano, 2013, chap. 3, is cautious about embracing it.

¹¹ See Alfano, 2013, p. 40.

there is the group of *situational non-reasons*, a group which includes ambient sensibilia and mood effects. Thirdly, there is the group of *non-moral individual differences*, a group which includes culture, gender, nationality, and so on. For our purposes, this third group can be ignored. I want to focus on the distinction between *bad* reasons and situational *non-reasons*.

Temptations, a species of bad reason in Alfano's classification, is not exactly interesting in order to challenge virtue theory. As Alfano recognizes, temptations "are completely familiar to virtue ethicists and slot nicely into their scheme of virtue, continence, incontinence, and vice" (Alfano, 2013, p. 40-41). The other species of bad reason in Alfano's classification is what he calls 'situational demand characteristics.' This kind of situational influence is described by Alfano such as follows:

[Situational demand characteristics] comprise the subtle features of situations that either give people bad reasons without their realizing it or induce them to attend too much to bad reasons and too little to good reasons. They tend to influence behavior on the sly, as it were. Two such demand characteristics are the presence of bystanders and social distance cues (Alfano, 2013, p. 41).

Alfano, then, proceeds to explain many cited studies in the situationist literature as explainable by precisely this species of situational influence (Alfano, 2013, p. 41-42). He speculates that this kind of factor might also explain Milgram (1974) studies on obedience and the results of Haney et al. (1973) prison simulation. Alfano concludes his discussion about situational demand characteristics stating

The better we come to understand situational demand characteristics, the more they transform into temptations. A demand characteristic is, if you like, a temptation in disguise. Hence, both temptations proper and demand characteristics should be handled straightforwardly by virtue ethicists. ... Temptations make it hard to be virtuous, but this isn't news. ... If

bad reasons were the only difficulty raised by situationism, it wouldn't be a devastating challenge (Alfano, 2013, p. 43).

Given this, it may already be clear that the real situationist challenge must be articulated focusing on situational *non*-reasons, such as ambient noise and mood elevator. In fact, Alfano concludes his discussion about situational non-reasons stating that

Because situational non-reasons such as sensibilia and mood effects are both seemingly trivial and normatively irrelevant, and because they exert a great deal of influence on people's morally relevant conduct, I consider them to be the heart of the situationist challenge. Bad reasons are bad, but it may be possible to handle them. Non-reasons are hugely influential, typically unnoticed, and provide no reason for the conduct they induce (Alfano, 2013, p. 50).

Take, for example, Alice Isen's studies on the cognitive impact of positive affections. As commented before, Isen et al. (1987) discovered that subjects who see few minutes of a comedy film or receive a small bag of candy improve their performance on two tasks generally regarded as requiring creative ingenuity. Now, few minutes of a comedy film and a small bag of candy (presumably mood elevators) are not reasons to behave in such-and-such way. Nevertheless, if the results of the studies are correct, then we just found that some situational non-reasons (acting as mood elevators) induce people to behave in a flexible or creative manner (i.e., in an intellectually laudable manner).

Now take another example. As commented before, Mathews and Cannon reported that 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 nearby¹². Now, ambient noise at a normal level is not a reason to behave in such-

¹² See Merritt et al., 2010, p. 357.

and-such way. Nevertheless, if the result of this study is correct, then we just found that some situational non-reason (ambient noise at a normal level) induces people to help (i.e., a morally laudable behavior), whereas another situational non-reason (the noise caused by a power lawnmower) induces people to not help (i.e., a morally reprehensible behavior).

Situationists see these results as evidence that morally and epistemically *relevant* behavior reliably covaries with morally and epistemically *irrelevant* situational variables. To put it in a slightly different way: A sufficient portion of morally and epistemically significant human behavior is inordinately susceptible to seemingly trivial and normatively irrelevant situational influences. This statement corresponds to the first claim of the pair of positive descriptive claims I have outlined before. This is the core of positive situationism.

Now, if it is true that a sufficient portion of morally and epistemically significant human behavior is inordinately susceptible to seemingly trivial and normatively irrelevant situational influences, then (situationists infer) a sufficient portion of morally and epistemically significant human behavior shows pervasive trait-relevant behavioral inconsistency which, at most, is compatible with the widespread possession of situation-indexed stable traits¹³. This statement helps us to see the connection between the first and the second claims of the pair of positive descriptive claims of descriptive situationism. Moreover, if it is the case that a sufficient portion of morally and epistemically significant human behavior shows pervasive trait-relevant behavioral inconsistency which, at most, is compatible with the widespread possession of situation-indexed stable traits, then global character traits neither explain, nor predict a sufficient portion of morally and epistemically significant human behavior. Furthermore, if global character traits neither explain, nor predict a sufficient portion of morally and epistemically significant human behavior, then there is no widespread possession of global character traits and, likewise, ascriptions of global character traits are systematic errors of

¹³ To put it alternatively: is compatible with *fragmented* personalities.

judgment. These final statements correspond to the global character skepticism pair of claims. Add to these claims the situationist exegesis of the Aristotelian tradition in virtue theory, and we are now in position to see the precise structure of the situationists' major argument:

P1. If a sufficient portion of morally and epistemically significant human behavior is inordinately susceptible to seemingly trivial and normatively irrelevant situational influences, then a sufficient portion of morally and epistemically significant human behavior shows pervasive trait-relevant behavioral inconsistency which, at most, is compatible with the widespread possession of situation-indexed stable traits.

P2. If a sufficient portion of morally and epistemically significant human behavior shows pervasive trait-relevant behavioral inconsistency which, at most, is compatible with the widespread possession of situation-indexed stable traits, then global character traits neither explain, nor predict a sufficient portion of morally and epistemically significant human behavior.

Therefore,

C1. If a sufficient portion of morally and epistemically significant human behavior is inordinately susceptible to seemingly trivial and normatively irrelevant situational influences, then global character traits neither explain, nor predict a sufficient portion of morally and epistemically significant human behavior (hypothetical syllogism, P1, P2).

P3. If global character traits neither explain, nor predict a sufficient portion of morally and epistemically significant human behavior, then there is no widespread possession of global character traits in human population.

P4. If global character traits neither explain, nor predict a sufficient portion of morally and epistemically significant human behavior, then ascriptions of global character traits are systematic errors of judgment.

Therefore,

C2. If global character traits neither explain, nor predict a sufficient portion of morally and epistemically significant human behavior, then there is no widespread possession of global character traits in human population and ascriptions of global character traits are systematic errors of judgment (conjunction, P3, P4).

Therefore,

C3. If a sufficient portion of morally and epistemically significant human behavior is inordinately susceptible to seemingly trivial and normatively irrelevant situational influences, then there is no widespread possession of global character traits in human population and ascriptions of global character traits are systematic errors of judgment (hypothetical syllogism, C1, C2).

P5. A sufficient portion of morally and epistemically significant human behavior is inordinately susceptible to seemingly trivial and normatively irrelevant situational influences.

Therefore,

C4. There is no widespread possession of global character traits in human population and ascriptions of global character traits are systematic errors of judgment (*modus ponens*, C3, P5).

Therefore,

C5. There is no widespread possession of global character traits in human population (simplification, C4).

P6. Global character traits correspond to the constructs of characterological psychology posed by Aristotelian virtue theory.

Therefore,

C6. There is no widespread possession of global character traits in human population and global character traits correspond to the constructs of characterological psychology posed by Aristotelian virtue theory (conjunction, C5, P6).

P7. If there is no widespread possession of global character traits in human population and global character traits correspond to the

constructs of characterological psychology posed by Aristotelian virtue theory, then Aristotelian virtue theory is committed with unrealistic assumptions about human characterological psychology.

Therefore,

C7. Aristotelian virtue theory is committed with unrealistic assumptions about human characterological psychology (*modus ponens*, C6, P7).

P8. If Aristotelian virtue theory is committed with unrealistic assumptions about human characterological psychology, then Aristotelian virtue theory is empirically unsupported.

P9. If Aristotelian virtue theory is committed with unrealistic assumptions about human characterological psychology, then Aristotelian virtue theory is normatively unmotivated.

Therefore,

C8. If Aristotelian virtue theory is committed with unrealistic assumptions about human characterological psychology, then Aristotelian virtue theory is empirically unsupported and Aristotelian virtue theory is normatively unmotivated (conjunction, P8, P9).

Therefore,

C9. Aristotelian virtue theory is empirically unsupported and Aristotelian virtue theory is normatively unmotivated (*modus ponens*, C7, C8)¹⁴.

Now, if we take this argument for granted, then it might be argued that intellectual character education, understood as an attempt to educate for a kind of global character trait – namely, global intellectual character traits – is not viable. Moreover, if it is not viable, then it should be

¹⁴ A simpler construction of the argument can be found in Merritt *et al.*, 2010. I prefer my own reconstruction because it is more accurate, more complete and it fits logically the two pairs of major descriptive claims by situationists philosophers together with their exegesis of the Aristotelian virtue theory.

abandoned for reasons concerning both some version of the ought-implies-can principle and principles concerning the accountability in the inefficient use of scarce resources. This latter worry was noted by Jason Baehr (2017). As he states the worry,

Suppose ... that situationist critiques of moral character and virtue ethics are successful. Given the structural similarity between moral virtues and intellectual virtues, this critique may also spell trouble for virtue epistemology and its application to educational theory and practice. It may, for instance, yield a decisive objection to thinking of intellectual character growth as a plausible educational aim. Indeed, situationist critiques may be especially pointed in this context: if intellectual virtue is a rare or non-existent phenomenon, attempts to educate for growth in intellectual virtues are likely to seem quixotic at best and a scandalous waste of scarce educational resources at worst (Baehr, 2017, p. 192-193).

Another way to object to the normative commitment for the status of intellectual virtue as an educational ideal is by arguing that, if we take the ought-implies-can principle to be true, then, if one *ought* to educate for intellectual virtues, then one *can* educate for intellectual virtues, but since one cannot educate for intellectual virtues because it is not a viable educational aim, then one does not *ought* to educate for intellectual virtues.

In sum, these are two different ways of arguing that, because intellectual character education is not viable, it should be abandoned. However, as I will make clear in what follows, I believe that this is only the tip of the iceberg. Situationists philosophers also have a *prescriptive program*, which, if it turns to be on the right track, then the status of intellectual virtue as an educational ideal will not only be threatened in terms of its viability, but also, and more surprisingly, in terms of its *desirability*.

Prescriptive situationism and intellectual character education

I want now to address the situationists' prescriptive program in philosophy. The purpose of this section is, first, to address and clarify the major situationists' *prescriptive* claims. I will propose that situationists philosophers' prescriptive program can be divided in two major sides: on the one hand, there is *trait ascription revisionism*, which applies to our common linguistic practice of trait ascription, whereas, on the other hand, there is *deliberative situationism*, which proposes first-person deliberations or niche constructions based on attending to situational features in order to effectively obtain moral and epistemic progress. Secondly, given the clarification of the situationist prescriptive program, I will construct two other objections that might be raised against intellectual character education. The idea here is to reveal the ways in which the situationists' prescriptive program might threaten the status of intellectual virtue as an educational ideal by threatening its desirability.

Let me begin with the situationism's revisionist program. Remember that one of the major claims by situationists philosophers is that global character trait ascriptions are systematic errors of judgment. This is a negative descriptive claim about a common practice among us, namely, the practice of ascribing global character traits to each other. Now, if it is true that we systematically fail to grasp the characterological status of each other, then we have reasons to be suspicious about the positive epistemic status of such ascriptions. In other words, if we agree with such a claim, then we are in no good epistemic position to believe that, in general, global trait ascription is epistemically justified. To sum up, we have epistemic reasons to try to resist, or even to fully abandon the ascription of global character traits to each other. Descriptive situationism seems to entail such a conclusion.

One might object that this is opposed to our common experience with people we are familiar with. As Doris recognizes it,

People undeniably exhibit substantial reliability in their behavior. Otherwise, we wouldn't fare as well in

social coordination as we do – just ask any bartender who confidently sets up a regular customer’s “usual” without being asked...

[S]ome behavioral tendencies are reliable enough to warrant the postulation of enduring dispositions (Doris, 2002, p. 65).

But situationists have responses to this kind of objection. For instance, Doris himself argues that his local trait theory might explain very well behavioral tendencies we see in people with which we interact on an everyday basis, since we interact with them in specific ordinary circumstances and local trait theory poses situation-indexed stable traits. But even for situationists who do not embrace local trait theory, it might be possible to offer good explanations of why we seem to grasp the character status of ordinary people in our practice of trait ascription. For instance, Alfano mentions and discusses many cognitive biases and heuristics that might be at work when we describe people’s conduct in terms of global character traits¹⁵. I will take for granted that situationists have some potentially good explanations for our common experience about people we are familiar with. What really interest me here is the claim that not only we lack epistemic justification to ascribe global character traits to each other, but also that we have moral reasons to resist to do so. For instance, Doris associates the ascription of global moral traits with moral emotions that can be poisoning to social interactions and the dignity of people¹⁶. Doris seems to think that our ascriptions of global moral *vices*, on the one hand, can result in an unjustified *global condemnation* that might harm people’s social functioning, and our ascriptions of global moral *virtues*, on the other hand, can result in an unjustified *global disappointment* that, equally, might harm people. Concentrating on this same point, Rodgers and Warmke (2015) rearticulate Doris’ idea to be that, for both epistemic and

¹⁵ For his discussion, see Alfano, 2013, p. 53–60.

¹⁶ For his entire discussion, see Doris, 2002, p. 167–170.

ethical reasons, we should try to resist the use of global character and personality ascriptions when explaining and predicting behavior¹⁷.

Alfano, on the other hand, draws a different conclusion from the idea that global trait ascriptions are systematic errors of judgments. According to him, the practice of virtue attributions particularly might be morally advisable and epistemically permissible. Alfano thinks virtue-labeling is morally advisable because, in a way analogous to phenomena such as placebo effects and self-fulfilling prophecies, virtue-labeling can originate behaviors *in accordance with* the assigned virtues. In other words, instead of the actual possession of a virtue, in which a person acts virtuously *because* of the virtue in question, virtue-labeling can originate acts in accordance with a given virtue even when people acting in accordance with a virtue is not grounded on the actual possession of the virtue in question. Alfano calls this phenomenon *factitious virtue*. As he states it, “[v]irtue-labeling causes *factitious virtue*, in which people behave in accordance with virtue not because they possess the trait in question but because that trait has been attributed to them” (Alfano, 2013, p. 90, italics in the original). This, however, only occur when some conditions are satisfied. Firstly, virtue-labeling must satisfy a plausibility condition. The idea here is that labeling someone virtuous can lead to virtuous action only if it is plausible to the target to believe that she actually is the kind of person the label describes. As Alfano states it, “labeling someone with a virtue when one has no evidence for the attribution is a recipe for failure” (Alfano, 2013, p. 91). Alfano connects this plausibility condition with the target’s *self-concept*. According to him, “trait labeling is especially effective when the label is consistent with the target’s initial self-concept” (Alfano, 2013, p. 91). He concludes his discussion of this condition stating that

The plausibility of an attribution has several sources. The structure of such an attribution is a triadic relation among an attributor, a target, and a predicate. The

¹⁷ See also Doris, 2002, p. 168.

attribution gains in plausibility if the target already agrees that the predicate applies, or at least does not disagree. It gains in plausibility if the attributor can point to evidence that it applies. It gains further if the attributor is an authority of some kind, whether an epistemic authority (he tends to know about such things), a moral authority (he understands what's good, right, and virtuous), or a political or bureaucratic authority (his judgments carry consequences even when he's wrong). An ideal case of factitious virtue would presumably draw on the moral and epistemic authority of a respected attributor (Alfano, 2013, p. 91-92).

In other words, according to Alfano, the plausibility of a virtue attribution can increase in function of three main sources: the attributor's perceived authority; the evidence both the attributor and the target share that the predicate in question applies; and the target's acceptance or disposition to accept the predicate as applicable to herself.

Secondly, virtue-labeling must satisfy publicity conditions. The idea here is that labeling someone virtuous can lead to virtuous action more effectively if the label is made publicly. The reasons Alfano offers in favor of this are connected both to the self-concept of the target and the expectations it generates on her. As Alfano puts it, "Publicly labeling someone prompts her to believe in the attribution, thus triggering a placebo-like effect through the mechanism of self-concept" (Alfano, 2013, p. 92), and

[P]ublicly labeling someone leads the audience of the announcement to expect her to act as advertised. And, by serving as a basis for common knowledge of this expectation, it leads her to know that they expect her to behave appropriately, to know that they know that she knows that they expect her to behave appropriately, to know that they know that she knows that they know that she knows that they expect her to behave appropriately, and so on. Just as people enjoy acting in accordance with their self-concepts and are

averse to violating them, so they often enjoy doing what others expect of them and are averse to letting other down (Alfano, 2013, p. 92).

I am not entirely convinced by the way Alfano describes this latter mechanism of expectation, but I think the general idea that expectations affect our conduct is plausible enough to ignore the details here.

Finally, virtue-labeling must satisfy a correct conception condition. The idea here is that labeling someone virtuous can lead to virtuous action only if the target of the label has a good grasp of what it is to be the kind of person the label describes. As Alfano states, “If you call someone honest, he will only begin to conduct himself honestly if he understands what honesty entails” (Alfano, 2013, p. 93), i.e., what it means to possess the trait of honesty or to act in accordance with such trait.

In conclusion, contrary to what Doris would conclude from the situationist literature, Alfano thinks it is *morally advisable* to attribute virtues, at least under the described conditions, since it will be morally desirable to induce people to act in accordance with virtues – although it will be morally unadvisable to attribute vices for similar reasons.¹⁸ Moreover, as Alfano’s discussion make it clear, it will be not only morally advisable to attribute virtues in the conditions just described, but also *epistemically permissible*. As Alfano states it, “We should relax our standards of sufficient evidence for virtue [attribution]”, whereas for vice attribution, on the contrary, we should “redouble our standards of sufficient evidence” (Alfano, 2013, p. 103).

Given the previous discussion, I propose that trait ascription revisionism can be presented such as follows:

1. For both epistemic and ethical reasons, either (a) we should try to resist the use of global character ascriptions when explaining and predicting behavior in order to avoid systematic errors of judgment and emotional responses that poison social interaction and

¹⁸ See Alfano, 2013, p. 94-96.

community, or (b) we should relax our standards of sufficient evidence for virtue attribution but redouble our standards of sufficient evidence for vice attribution in order to induce factitious virtues.

The choice between the two alternatives of this disjunction is something I will leave open to debate. The important thing to see here is that both are prescriptions about our practice of ascribing character traits to each other. Moreover, I believe that the prescription advocated by Doris might raise some worries about the status of intellectual virtue as an educational ideal. Particularly, I think Doris' version of trait ascription revisionism, which I call *radical* trait ascription revisionism, potentially threatens the desirability of intellectual character education. Consider, for instance, two standard strategies in the literature about educating for intellectual virtues, namely, direct or formal instruction and exposure to exemplars¹⁹. These two general strategies form part of what Steven Porter called “the ‘standard approach’ to virtue formation” (Porter, 2016, p. 222). Direct instruction is about to learn the language of virtues in order to be able to identify and appreciate virtues in actions, emotions, and motivation. In other words, it is about learning about virtues itself, its nature and importance. Exposure to exemplars, on the other hand, have to do with emulating virtuous persons, in a process that might be described, roughly, as involving a sequence of admiration, reflective endorsement, and imitation²⁰. Now, the objection of radical trait ascription revisionism I have in mind can be constructed such as follows:

- (1) Intellectual character education requires direct instruction on the nature and importance of virtues and exposure to exemplars of the virtues.

¹⁹ See Baehr, 2014; Battaly, 2016.

²⁰ See Croce, 2019, p. 292.

(2) Both strategies (direct instruction and exposure to exemplars) invite the language of global character traits in order to identify and assess the nature and importance of virtues as well as the exemplars of the virtues.

(3) However, for both epistemic and ethical reasons, we should try to resist the use of global character and personality ascriptions when describing and predicting human conduct.

Therefore,

(4) For both epistemic and ethical reasons, we should try to resist the strategies of direct instruction and exposure to exemplars in order to educate students.

(5) If ethical reasons demand that we should try to resist the use of global character and personality ascriptions when describing and predicting human conduct, then the enterprise of intellectual character education is ethically inconvenient.

Therefore,

(6) The enterprise of intellectual character education is ethically inconvenient²¹.

The conclusion of this objection is indeed surprising. I will return to it in the next section.

²¹ In the first version of this objection, I have constructed the second premise such as follows: “Direct instruction on the nature and importance of virtues and exposure to exemplars of the virtues *inevitably involve* the ascription of global character traits.” However, as Jason Baehr has pointed to me in a conversation, there is nothing in direct instruction and exposure to exemplars that inherently commits such strategies with global character ascriptions, as my first construction of the premise suggests – after all, a careful adoption of such strategies might avoid a globalist conception of character if this is a problem at all. I agree with Baehr in this respect, but I think one worry remains: direct instruction on the nature and importance of virtues and exposure to exemplars of the virtues come with a high risk of adopting of a “globalist discourse” about character, since, as cognitive misers, we have a tendency to simplify our discourse about things and a “globalist conception” of character is simpler, less nuanced than fragmented conceptions of character.

Now, there is another important piece in the prescriptive program of situationists philosophers, which I call deliberative situationism. As Doris puts it,

I'm urging a certain redirection of our ethical attention. Rather than striving to develop characters that will determine our behavior in ways substantially independent of circumstance, we should invest more of our energies in attending to the features of our environment that influence behavioral outcomes (Doris, 2002, p. 146).

Notice that Doris is contrasting two options here: one the one hand, we might strive to develop character traits that will, in his words, determine our behavior in ways substantially independent of circumstance (i.e., global character traits)²², whereas, on the other hand, we might invest our energy in attending to the features of our environment that influence behavioral outcomes²³. As an example of this latter option and the opposition between, on the one hand, attending to the features of our environment and, on the other hand, relying on character development, Doris describes the following case:

Imagine that a colleague with whom you have had a long flirtation invites you for dinner, offering enticement of interesting food and elegant wine, with the excuse that you are temporarily orphaned while your spouse is out of town. Let's assume the obvious way to read this text is the right one, and assume further that you regard the infidelity that may result as an ethically undesirable outcome... [Y]ou might think

²² It is disputable if virtue theorists, even in the Aristotelian tradition, conceive character traits in terms of dispositions that “determine our behavior in ways substantially independent of circumstance”. I think they do not. However, this is an exegetical dispute which I will not address here, although I think it is part of a deserved, more complete response to the situationists.

²³ For a critical assessment of Doris' program, see Rodgers & Warmke, 2015; Miller, 2014, p. 236-237; and Kleingeld, 2015, p. 354-358.

that there is little cause for concern; you are, after all, an upright person, and a spot of claret never did anyone a bit of harm. On the other hand, if you take the lessons of situationism to heart, you avoid the dinner like the plague, because you know that you are not able to confidently predict your behavior in a problematic situation on the basis of your antecedent values. You do not doubt that you sincerely value fidelity; you simply doubt your ability to act in conformity with this value once the candles are lit and the wine begins to flow. Relying on character once in the situation is a mistake, you agree; the way to achieve the ethically desirable result is to recognize that situational pressures may all too easily overwhelm character and avoid the dangerous situation (Doris, 2002, p. 147).

Of course, as Doris himself recognizes, in the case just described it is no surprise that the best option to choose is to decline the invitation, avoiding a tempting situation and seeking situations more friendly to fidelity. The point Doris wants to argue with this unsurprising case, however, is that, in order to make better choices, “we need to make use of the surprising situationist data” (Doris, 2002, p. 147). As he argues in the sequence,

The way to get things right more often, I suggest, is by attending to the determinative features of situations. We should try, so far as we are able, to avoid “near occasions for sin” – ethically dangerous circumstances. At the same time, we should seek near occasions for happier behaviors – situations conducive to ethically desirable conduct (Doris, 2002, p. 147).

Although Doris’ program has its obvious limits when it comes to choosing between situational influences such as ambient sensibilia and mood effects, I take it to be, at least in general, a good advice. But I also think deliberative situationism accommodates recent proposals in psychologically informed policy making, exemplified in popular books such as *Nudge* (2021), with the difference that in this latter case we talk about

adaptive designs of the decision environment (i.e., choice architecture), while in the case of Doris' deliberative situationism, we are specifically talking about making *first-person* moral deliberation by taking seriously the situationist lessons. Doris' idea then is that moral improvement can be brought about most effectively by *attending to situational features*, as opposed to aiming at the cultivation of moral character traits.²⁴ Generalizing it to the case of intellectual virtues, we might think that epistemic improvement can be brought about most effectively by attending to situational features, as opposed to aiming at the cultivation of intellectual character traits. To sum up, deliberative situationism can be presented such as follows:

2. Taking into account the situationist lessons, moral and epistemic improvement can be brought about most effectively (a) by attending to the situational features, as opposed to aiming at the cultivation of global character traits, or (b) by designing the decision environment in such a way that induces appropriate behavior.

If deliberative situationism is true or advisable, however, it raises more questions about the desirability of the status of intellectual virtue as an educational ideal. This is because if intellectual virtue is an educational ideal, then it will be appropriate to invite students to intellectually challenging circumstances and intellectual improvement should aim primarily at the cultivation of good intellectual character traits, such as intellectual courage and open-mindedness, instead of choosing only the “near occasions for happier [epistemic] behavior”. To sum up, it seems to me that deliberative situationism is at odds with intellectual character education. The argument can be constructed such as follows:

- (1) If epistemic improvement can be brought about most effectively by attending to situational features, as opposed to aiming at the

²⁴ For the present articulation of the idea, I am in debt with Rodgers & Warmke, 2015.

cultivation of good intellectual character traits, then, for reasons concerning efficiency, it is undesirable to pursue the educational aim of intellectual virtue.

(2) Epistemic improvement can be brought about most effectively by attending to situational features, as opposed to aiming at the cultivation of good intellectual character traits.

Therefore,

(3) For reasons concerning efficiency, it is undesirable to pursue the educational aim of intellectual virtue.

I have reconstructed here what can be identified as the prescriptive program of situationists philosophers. Prescriptive situationism consists of the following pair of statements:

1. For both epistemic and ethical reasons, either (a) we should try to resist the use of global character ascriptions when explaining and predicting behavior in order to avoid systematic errors of judgment and emotional responses that poison social interaction and community, or (b) we should relax our standards of sufficient evidence for virtue attribution but redouble our standards of sufficient evidence for vice attribution in order to induce factitious virtues.

2. Taking into account the situationist lessons, moral and epistemic improvement can be brought about most effectively (a) by attending to the situational features, as opposed to aiming at the cultivation of global character traits, or (b) by designing the decision environment in such a way that induces appropriate behavior.

Moreover, I have constructed two additional arguments against intellectual character education on the basis of each of the statements on the above pair. Roughly, if prescriptive situationism is correct, then it threatens the desirability of intellectual character education in terms of ethical convenience and efficiency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, philosophical situationism, an amalgam between moral and epistemic situationism, can be divided into descriptive and prescriptive situationism. On the one hand, descriptive situationism corresponds to two pairs of descriptive claims. On the other hand, prescriptive situationism corresponds to one pair of prescriptive claims. Both descriptive and prescriptive claims raise worries concerning intellectual character education. On the one hand, descriptive situationism raises an objection against the viability of intellectual character education. On the other hand, prescriptive situationism raises two objections against the desirability of intellectual character education.

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