

Situationism & Moral Responsibility

Virtue ethics: according to Aristotle and others, ethics is not fundamentally about right and wrong, but about being a certain kind of person. In particular, it's about acquiring certain traits or virtues. Moreover, in everyday life, our practices of moral education, character assessment, and prediction seem deeply committed to moral behavior being a function of moral traits.

Globalism: moral behavior exhibits (a) cross-situational consistency, (b) diachronic stability, and (c) is integrated (possessing one virtue implies possessing others)

The Fundamental Attribution Error: Western Europeans (especially) tend to overestimate the degree to which people's behavior reflects enduring traits rather than situational features.

Situationism: the theory that virtue ethics is a mistake, and that we should acknowledge the frequent and often significant influence of situation on moral behavior.

Key experimental evidence

- Milgram experiment
- Stanford prison experiment
- Hartshorne honesty experiments
- Seminary experiment
- Phone-booth experiment
- Forced speech delivery
- Asch conformity experiments
- Bystander experiments

Objections to situationism

- (1) Heroic virtue: not everyone succumbs to situational influences; virtue theory is instantiated by the few, the "heroes." Worry: even heroes exhibit cross-situational inconsistency (Schindler the philandering war-profiteer).
- (2) Aggregation: people look more consistent when we aggregate data across many observations. Worry: can you be *kind* even if you fail now and then, if when you *do* fail you fail spectacularly (inflicting lethal electrical shocks on people)?
- (3) Construal: situations must be interpreted in line with the agent's appraisal. (A child isn't exhibiting dishonesty if he reads his situation as "finders keepers.") Worry: are people free to construe their moral situation however they like?

Moral responsibility: How might situationism undermine moral responsibility?

- (1) Hume: actions must reflect underlying moral traits to be objects of praise/blame. No blaming people for freak-occurrences like seizures. Worry: we do praise/blame people acting “out of character” (Redlicht-Torah case).
- (2) Self-knowledge & identification: people must identify with their motives to be praised/blamed, and people in e.g. bystander situations are deeply confused about why they act as they do (“What have I done?” response).
- (3) “Everybody’s doing it”: if nearly everyone fails in some situations, then (a) probably *we* would have failed as well, raising issues of moral hypocrisy; (b) more importantly, we might infer that those failing are exposed to an influence it’s unreasonable to expect the average person to resist (POW & Chinese water-torture case).

Concluding dilemma: does situationism undermine moral responsibility?

Yes: then how can we preserve ordinary praise/blame practices regarding the Nazis, Abu Ghraib, etc.?

No: then how can we avoid “moral luck”? We can’t always control which situations we find ourselves in, and in some of them we’re almost certain to fail just as a result of being in that situation (?).

Moral luck: we lack control over (a) how things turn out (drunk driving case); (b) circumstances (obedience contexts); (c) our constitution (don’t choose basic dispositions); and (d) antecedent circumstances (determinism). So our moral worth may be influenced by luck.