1-1-2016

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SHOULD CHRISTIANS BE WORRIED ABOUT SITUATIONIST CLAIMS IN PSYCHOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY?

Christian B. Miller

The situationist movement in psychology and, more recently, in philosophy has been associated with a number of striking claims, including that most people do not have the moral virtues and vices, that any ethical theory that is wedded to such character traits is empirically inadequate, and that much of our behavior is causally influenced to significant degrees by psychological influences about which we are often unaware. Yet Christian philosophers have had virtually nothing to say about situationist claims. The goal of this paper is to consider whether Christians should start to be worried about them.

Here are the results of a study of helping behavior by the psychologists Arnie Cann and Jill Blackwelder (1984):

> *Bathroom.* In the control condition, 45% of people agreed to deliver some documents 40 meters away when approached in the hallway of a building. By contrast, 80% agreed to carry out the same task in the experimental condition. The only difference was that these people had just exited a public bathroom.[1]

This is exactly the kind of study that so-called "situationists" in both psychology and philosophy love to cite. And on the basis of dozens of studies like it, they tend to arrive at some rather bold conclusions. For instance, they tend to say that most people do not have any of the virtues (in this case the virtue of compassion), which includes the moral virtues, epistemic virtues, prudential virtues, and the like. And the same goes for the vices, too, like cruelty or cold-heartedness. Furthermore, they also tend to claim that much of our behavior is causally influenced, to significant degrees, by psychological influences about which we are often unaware (in this case, influences triggered by using the bathroom). All this is a significant departure from commonsense thinking about action. But situationists call for commonsense thinking to be revised.

The situationist movement first started in psychology in the 1960s and 70s, launching what became a longstanding "person-situation debate" and, not surprisingly, calling into question widely-held assumptions

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[1]Cann and Blackwelder, "Compliance and Mood," 224.

about personality and indeed about the viability of the entire discipline of personality psychology. Meanwhile, philosophers started to really pay attention to situationism only at the turn of the century, thanks in large part to the work of Gilbert Harman and John Doris. These two philosophers took the implications of situationism even further, arguing that any ethical theory that appeals to virtues like honesty or compassion is in serious trouble. Virtue ethics, especially of the neo-Aristotelian kind, was said to be particularly vulnerable.

Predictably, there has been a sizable literature responding to situationist claims in both psychology and philosophy. But at the same time there has been almost uniform silence on these matters from philosophers and theologians writing from an explicitly Christian perspective.[2]

There could be various reasons for this silence. Perhaps Christians in these fields have devoted their attention to more pressing issues, such as the problem of evil. Perhaps they have just overlooked the relevant empirical research, as most philosophers tended to do for several decades. Or perhaps they are aware of the research and related controversies, but do not find them particularly troubling.

Regardless of the answer to this sociological question, the goal of this paper is to consider whether Christians *should* be concerned about claims being made in the situationist literature in either philosophy or psychology. More specifically, are there any reasons why Christians, *qua Christians*, should be concerned? It may turn out that all of us, whether religious or atheist, Christian or agnostic, should be worried about that literature. But here my focus is just on whether, given standard Christian commitments, Christians should be especially worried.

Unfortunately, the discussion will end up being complicated by the fact that there is no one claim or position that goes by the name "situationist." So I will have to spend some time distinguishing various claims that are associated with the situationist label in both disciplines.

This is new ground that has not been trodden before, and so this paper will be largely exploratory in nature rather than arriving at definitive conclusions. It is divided into two main parts. The first considers the central claim made by situationists about what is *not* influencing our behavior, namely character traits like honesty and cowardice. The second part considers the central claims made by situationists about what *does* typically influence our behavior, namely psychological dispositions the significant role of which will likely come as a surprise to us. The final section of the paper will try to bring these negative and positive claims together in

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[2]Indeed I could find only one article in a philosophy of religion or a theology journal which discusses situationism in any detail (Kim, "Have the Manicheans Returned?"). To be fair, some philosophers who also are Christians have written about situationism (e.g., Adams, *A Theory of Virtue*), but they have not done so from an explicitly Christian perspective. What they have said could have been written by a secular philosopher as well.

Finally, it is worth clarifying that the situationist movement at issue in this paper bears no relation to the position in normative theory called "situation ethics" which was developed by, among others, Joseph Fletcher in the 1960s.

evaluating some implications for how Christians should think about these matters.

1. The Negative Side of Situationism in Psychology and Philosophy

Let me start with situationism in psychology, and specifically with the central claim about traits that the situationist position is perhaps most famous for advocating:

> (N1) There is a large body of experimental evidence that is incompatible with the widespread possession of those character traits that are supposed to be stable over time in the same situations as well as consistent across relevant situations.[3]

Examples of such traits would range from moral traits like honesty and compassion to non-moral traits like open-mindedness, cleverness, extraversion, and calmness. What they have in common is that they are psychological dispositions that are alleged to give rise to trait-relevant thoughts and/or action. Hence other things being equal, the trait of honesty, when triggered, will give rise to honesty-relevant thoughts and feelings, which then in turn cause subsequent honest action. Furthermore, someone who has the trait of honesty is expected to reliably tell the truth when appropriate, both over time in the same situations, e.g., the courtroom (stability), and in a number of different relevant situations, e.g., the courtroom, office, and school (cross-situational consistency).

The evidence alluded to in (N1) comes in different forms, but the main focus has been on what, for situationists, is the heart of the matter—the alleged cross-situational consistency of many character traits.[4] When it comes to stability of behavior over time in the same situations, for instance, situationists typically admit that correlations are robust and often well above .30.[5] Consistency across situations is a different matter. For instance, when scores for a group of participants on such questionnaires are related to their actual behavior, or when trait-relevant behavior in one particular situation is related to behavior in another situation, correlations are surprising low, rarely exceeding .30.[6]

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[3]The following labels have been used in the psychology literature to describe these traits: (i) behavioral dispositions, (ii) psychological realities, (iii) causes of behavior, (iv) broad, (v) global, (vi) stable, (vii) cross-situationally consistent, (viii) situation- or context-free. For references to each of these labels and elaboration of what they mean, see Miller, *Character and Moral Psychology*, chapter 4. I have omitted these complexities in the interest of space.

[4]Mischel and Peake, "Beyond Déjà vu in the Search for Cross-Situational Consistency"; Wright and Mischel, "A Conditional Approach to Dispositional Constructs," 1160; Mischel and Shoda, "A Cognitive-Affective System Theory of Personality," 247; and Shoda, "A Unified Framework for the Study of Behavioral Consistency," 362.

[5]See Mischel, *Personality and Assessment*, 36, 282; Mischel, "Toward a Cognitive Social Learning Reconceptualization of Personality," 253; Mischel and Peake, "Beyond Déjà vu," 732, 734–737; Wright and Mischel, "A Conditional Approach," 1161–1162; Ross and R. Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation*, 101, 129; and Shoda, "A Unified Framework," 365–366.

[6]For classic reviews and discussions that are commonly labeled "situationist," see Peterson, *The Clinical Study of Social Behavior*, Mischel, *Personality and Assessment*, and, later,

The same concern about cross-situational consistency carried over to the philosophy literature. As already mentioned, Gilbert Harman and John Doris were primarily responsible for elevating the prominence of situationism in philosophy at the turn of the century.[7] However, unlike psychologists working in the 1960s and 70s, they have been more narrowly focused on the *moral* virtues and vices, and their ultimate goal has been to advance a debate in normative ethical theory about the plausibility of Aristotelian virtue ethics.

Their main line of reasoning tends to proceed in two broad stages. First, they argue for an empirical conclusion roughly as follows:

(1) If there is widespread possession of the moral virtues (and vices) understood, at least in part, as cross-situationally consistent character traits, then systematic empirical observation using appropriate psychology experiments will reveal most people acting virtuously (or viciously) in a wide variety of situations relevant to the particular virtue (or vice) in question.[8]

(2) However, systematic empirical observation using appropriate psychology experiments fails to reveal that most people act in this kind of way.

(3) Therefore, given the psychological evidence, we are justified in believing on the basis of that evidence that most people do not possess the moral virtues or vices.[9]

Thus the main focus of their argument is also on trait cross-situational consistency, and they claim that there is sufficient empirical evidence to conclude that most people are not consistently virtuous (or vicious) from one relevant situation to the next.

As evidence for their conclusion, Harman and Doris put less weight on the correlational research from psychology. Instead, they mainly appeal to the results of a variety of psychology experiments that examined participants' behavior in different morally relevant situations. Some of their favorite examples include:

Dime in the Phone Booth. Shoppers at a mall were observed using a phone booth, and as soon as they left the booth, a stranger (actually a confederate) would walk slightly ahead and to the side of them, and

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Ross and Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation*.

[7]See Harman, "Moral Philosophy meets Social Psychology"; "The Nonexistence of Character Traits"; "Virtue Ethics without Character Traits"; Doris, "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics"; Doris, *Lack of Character*; Doris, "Heated Agreement"; and Merritt, Doris, and Harman, "Character." For an earlier discussion see Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality*.

[8]See, e.g., Doris "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics," 523n23.

[9]Something like this reconstruction seems to be what Doris has in mind in his "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics," 505–507, and Merritt et al., "Character," 357–358. For a more extensive reconstruction of their argument, see Miller, *Character and Moral Psychology*, chapter 8.

"accidentally" drop a folder full of papers. It turned out that finding a dime or not in the coin return slot of the phone booth seemed to make a significant difference (88 percent versus 4 percent) to whether a person would subsequently help to pick up these papers. There were replication problems with this study, but other studies on mood effects found a similar pattern.[10]

Lady in Distress. In Latané and Rodin's classic 1969 "Lady in Distress" experiment, the main dependent variable was whether participants exhibited any helping behavior after hearing a loud crash in the next room and a woman's scream, followed by cries of pain resulting from a bookshelf apparently having fallen on top of her. Participants alone in the next room helped 70 percent of the time, while a participant in the same room with an unresponsive confederate helped only 7 percent of the time.[11]

Obedience to Authority. In experiment 5, the most famous version of Stanley Milgram's shock experiments, participants were told to administer a test to someone in another room, and for every wrong answer, they were to give increasingly severe electric shocks. The test taker was a confederate and the shocks were fake, but participants did not know this. Under pressure from an experimenter who was in the same room with the participant, 65 percent of participants inflicted apparently lethal 450-volt XXX shocks, and 80 percent gave shocks which were at least at the 270-volt level. This despite the fact that at 270 volts the test taker was heard making agonizing screams and demanding to be let out, with the pleas getting desperate and hysterical at higher levels.[12]

In all three cases, the relevant virtue is supposed to be compassion, and in all three cases we find a pattern of behavior that is not in line with what we would expect if most people instantiated that virtue.

In the second stage of their argument, Harman and Doris use the conclusion in (3) to assess the plausibility of Aristotelian virtue ethics, along with any other view in ethics that relies on cross-situationally consistent virtues and vices. While my concern in this paper is not with virtue ethics, it is worth examining in the next section of this paper whether any parallel concerns might carry over to how Christians tend to think about ethics.

2. Should Christians be Worried about the Negative Side of Situationism?

We have seen that situationists in both philosophy and psychology have advanced a claim about—at the very least—the absence of the moral

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[10]Isen and Levin, "Effect of Feeling Good on Helping," 384–388. For more on some of the replication troubles that arose, as well as other mood effect studies, see Miller, *Moral Character*, chapter 4.

[11]Latané and Rodin, "A Lady in Distress," 193–195 and Latané and Darley, *The Unresponsive Bystander*, 60–63.

[12]For this and other shock experiments conducted by Milgram, see his *Obedience to Authority*.

virtues and vices in the characters of most people. Now whether such a claim is justified is of course open to lively debate. In my own case, I have argued at great length, using additional experimental evidence not often cited in this discussion, in support of the same conclusion about absent virtue and vice.[13] Not everyone, of course, is going to be persuaded by these arguments.[14] But for the sake of discussion here, let me provisionally accept this negative conclusion and see whether, assuming it is correct, there is anything problematic that follows for Christianity.

Before proceeding further, it is important to clear up one possible misunderstanding. I think we should readily acknowledge from the start that how situationists tend to conceive of character traits like compassion is likely going to differ in various ways from how Aristotelian virtue ethicists tend to conceive of them. And both approaches will in turn also likely differ from Christian approaches to character as well. Furthermore, Christians disagree amongst themselves on important questions about character, such as whether virtues are only acquired by human beings or are sometimes infused by God, what the list of virtues should contain, whether original sin precludes the possession of the virtues in the unredeemed, and so forth. These differences and disagreements matter because even if situationists are right that character traits *as they conceive them* are scarce, it would not follow that character traits *as Christians* (*or as some Christians*) *conceive them* are scarce.[15]

As a methodological observation this is certainly true. And it would be a long and messy task to try to sort through different Christian conceptions of character and see what bearing the experimental literature would have on each of them. Fortunately, though, we can bypass this task here. For as I have been careful to note, there is one particular feature of many character traits which has been the focus of attention for situationists, namely the cross-situational consistency of trait-relevant behavior. Other issues—how they are supposed to be acquired, whether God can infuse them, whether they require appropriate motivation, and so forth—are secondary issues in this discussion. And regardless of the differences that exist among Christian conceptions of character, they almost always assume that the virtues and vices are going to be cross-situationally consistent in their manifestation.[16] If that requirement isn't met for most

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[13]See Miller, *Moral Character* and *Character and Moral Psychology*.

[14]For some of the leading responses to situationist interpretations of the empirical data, see Kamtekar, "Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character" and Sreenivasan, "Errors about Errors." For criticism of my own interpretation of the empirical data, see Bates, "Mixed Traits and Dispositions." For an extensive catalog of the different responses that have been offered, see Miller, *Character and Moral Psychology*, chapter 8.

[15]Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

[16]Note that I take the cross-situational consistency requirement to apply to the virtues *and* the vices. Someone who has the vice of dishonesty to a high degree, for instance, would attempt to cheat others for his own advantage both regularly over time and also consistently across various situations such as paying his taxes, taking tests, and so forth (under certain conditions, such as when he thinks he can get away with it, the rewards are significant

people, then we have good reason to think, even from a Christian perspective, that most people do not have these traits.

So back, then, to the central question. Assuming for the sake of discussion that most people do not have the moral virtues and vices, is that a conclusion that should worry Christians *qua* Christians? Perhaps Harman and Doris can provide us with some guidance here. In a 1998 paper Doris claims that, "Aristotelian virtue ethics, when construed as invoking a generally applicable descriptive psychology . . . [is] subject to damaging empirical criticism."[17] Here I think we get to the heart of the matter. Suppose that, instead of Aristotelian virtue ethics, it turns out that Christianity is committed in some way to a descriptive account of our psychological lives that attributes the moral virtues or vices to most people. Then, given that we have also provisionally accepted the situationist claim that most people do not have the virtues or vices, Christianity would be wedded to a false commitment.

But in the case of Aristotelian virtue ethics, there is a natural reply to be made here to Doris, which I have called the rarity reply.[18] It simply denies that any form of virtue ethics is committed on descriptive grounds to the widespread possession of the virtues. So too in the case of Christianity. The Christian can consistently hold—for various reasons such as personal sin, original sin, the fall, the Devil and his minions, or a variety of other explanatory stories—that most people, including most Christians, do not live up to the standards of being even weakly virtuous.[19] At the same time, Christians can still assert that there has been at least one person (Jesus Christ) who did in fact perfectly exhibit the virtues throughout his life, and a few other human beings who had characters which made them worthy of sainthood or at least of serving as moral exemplars.

I do not see anything in discussions of the rarity reply in the literature on virtue ethics that would carry over in a problematic way for Christianity. So (N1) seems to provide little cause for concern at this point. But

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enough, and so forth). Similarly when it comes to other vices like cruelty, apathy, and gluttony. Vices are not just absent virtues, in other words, but stable, consistent, and causally efficacious dispositions in their own right.

Now one *could* understand the vices very differently, as centrally involving dispositions to not exhibit cross-situationally consistent virtuous behavior. Hence on this approach I would be a dishonest person if I exhibit honesty in some situations but dishonesty in others, where there isn't good moral justification for this inconsistency in behavior.

Let me briefly say two things about this approach. First, I don't think it captures commonsense thinking about the vices, nor is it a common approach in either the Aristotelian or Christian tradition of thinking about character traits. But secondly, if we just want to stipulate that 'vices' are going to be understood in this way, then I would need to recast much of this section of the paper. For then while results from situationism would still cast doubt on the widespread possession of the virtues, they would now strengthen the view that most of us are vicious. Thanks to Mark Murphy and an anonymous reviewer for helpful discussion of these issues.

[17]Doris, "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics," 520.

[18]For extensive discussion, see Miller, *Character and Moral Psychology*, chapter 8.

[19]Of course, some of these explanatory stories might be more plausible than others. Fortunately there is no need to assess them here.

that is not the end of the story. For we also need to ask whether the rarity reply is inconsistent with any central Christian commitments. Let me end this section by noting two possibilities that come to mind.

First, note that the rarity reply is formulated in terms of the *virtues* being rare. But the claims arising from situationism in both philosophy and psychology would apply to both the virtues *and* the vices. Dishonesty and cruelty, for instance, are both traditionally thought to be character traits which, if held, would reliably lead to stable and cross-situationally consistent behavior over time. So if Christians are committed to the widespread possession of the vices, then the situationist literature could render their descriptive psychology problematic after all.

Have Christians tended to make such a commitment? Here there is no simple historical answer to give. Certainly one can find examples of Christian writers saying things along these lines in various places, such as in some discussions of the doctrine of total depravity. The better question here is—what *should* Christians do if they have made such a commitment?

One option is to challenge the relevant empirical data from psychology, or at least the use being made of that data in drawing conclusions about our lack of vice. My own view, for what it is worth, is that this is an important strategy, to be sure, but also one that will ultimately be unsuccessful. For as I have discussed at great length, both the data themselves and the inferences on behalf of that data are plausible enough in my view to justify a lack of vice thesis.[20]

Better, then, it seems to me for the Christian to consider abandoning a commitment to the view that there is widespread vice, at least barring sufficient scriptural warrant for the claim. If there *is* sufficient scriptural warrant, then depending on one's view of the authority of scripture, it should take precedence on this matter and the empirical data will have to be reassessed. But if there is scriptural leeway here, then my recommendation stands that the Christian not affirm that most people are vicious.[21]

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[20]See Miller, *Moral Character* and *Character and Moral Psychology*.

[21]In a longer discussion, we would need to consider the relationship between the claim that most people are not vicious and various formulations of the doctrine of original sin. For it might seem that this doctrine entails precisely that most people *are* vicious. As Calvin writes, for instance, "Our nature is not only completely empty of goodness, but so full of every kind of wrong that it is always active" (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 91).

Briefly, the problem with views like this is that they are demonstrably false on psychological grounds. There is overwhelming empirical evidence that we have *some* psychological capacities which bring about morally good actions done for morally good reasons. For instance, the psychologist Daniel Batson has shown that our empathetic capacities can lead us to help other people in need for altruistic reasons (*Altruism in Humans*).

So perhaps not surprisingly, the most plausible formulations of the doctrine of original sin, in my view, do not entail that everyone is vicious. Instead, following an excellent recent discussion by Michael Rea, I take the heart of the doctrine to be captured by a claim like this:

> All human beings (except, at most, four) suffer from a kind of corruption that makes it very likely that they will fall into sin. ("The Metaphysics of Original Sin," 319–356)

Note that giving up such a commitment to widespread vice would not automatically commit Christians to thereby accepting the widespread possession of the virtues. Rather, there is both conceptual and, I claim, empirical space for a middle ground, as illustrated in Figure 1.
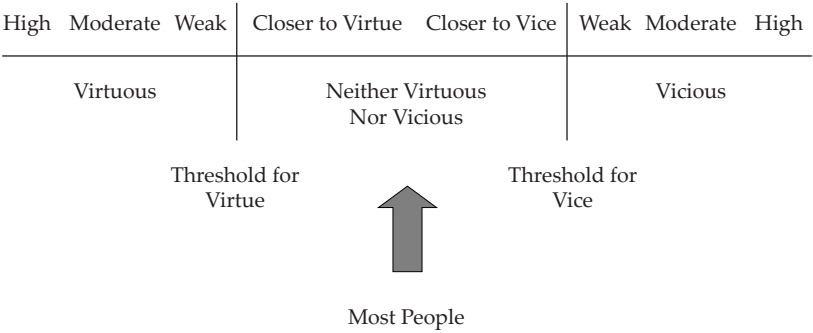
High Moderate Weak	Closer to Virtue Closer to Vice	Weak Moderate High
Virtuous	Neither Virtuous Nor Vicious	Vicious

Threshold for   Threshold for
Virtue   Vice

Most People

Figure 1. *Where Most People Fall on the Continuum between Perfect Virtue and Perfect Vice.*

In other words, the Christian can claim that, as a contingent matter, most people today are neither virtuous nor vicious.[22]

Now what this middle ground looks like with respect to most people is an interesting question. Here are some options for fleshing it out:

Most people have local virtues to some degree, which are indexed to very specific situations such as honesty in the courtroom or compassion in the mall.

Most people have local vices to some degree, which are similarly indexed.[23]

Most people are continent to some degree, and so they know the morally right thing to do, face temptation in the opposite direction, but reliably and successfully resist it.

But this claim is neutral on whether people have the vices. It is even compatible with the possession of the virtues to a weak or moderate degree. Thanks to Tom Flint and Dan Moller for pressing me to say something about original sin.

[22]To avoid a possible worry, note that this diagram is compatible with Aristotelian approaches to thinking about these matters. Indeed, Aristotle himself held that most people occupy a middle ground between virtue and vice (see Curzer, *Aristotle and the Virtues* for extensive discussion). Furthermore, Figure 1 fits nicely with the doctrine of the mean if we expand it a bit more and add another middle space to the left of the virtue category, and then another vice category to the left of it. So you would have (reading from left to right): the vice of deficiency, a middle space, the virtue in the middle, another middle space, and the vice of excess.

[23]For local virtues and vices, see Doris, "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics," 507–508, and *Lack of Character*, 23, 25, 64. Naturally one could hold a view according to which most people have some local virtues and some local vices.

Most people are incontinent to some degree, and so they know the morally right thing to do, face temptation in the opposite direction, and reliably give into it.

Fortunately we do not need to evaluate these proposals here. The important point is the possibility of holding that most people occupy this middle space.[24]

Earlier I said there are two ways in which the rarity response might be worrisome given a Christian's other commitments *qua* Christian. The first has to do with whether a lack of vice thesis is acceptable. I claim that it is. The second has to do with becoming virtuous. According to the rarity response, recall, Christians can reasonably accept that most people are not morally virtuous. Suppose this is right. Even so, that clearly cannot be the end of the story as far as a Christian approach to character is concerned. For Christians should care strongly about *becoming* virtuous, or more specifically about becoming people of deep faith, love, hope, honesty, wisdom, courage, and all the down the line. So they need to have something to say about how to bridge the gap between our present lack of virtue and the end goal of becoming virtuous people. More specifically, they need to have something to say given the obstacles to virtue that have been uncovered in the situationist literature.

Here is a way to spell out the issue in a bit more detail:

(1) An important ethical goal according to Christianity is to become a virtuous person.

(2) But most of us fall far short of being virtuous people, as demonstrated in part by experimental results in psychology.

(3) Hence Christians need to outline realistic and empirically-informed ways for most Christians to improve on their non-virtuous characters, and, at least as far as the situationist literature is concerned, so far they have not done so.

(4) Therefore Christians face an important challenge that they need to address.

Three quick notes about this argument. First, becoming a virtuous person need not be *the* central goal for Christians. Perhaps something like being redeemed, or glorifying God, or becoming children of God, or entering into the kingdom of heaven, counts as the central goal. Nevertheless,

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[24]Incidentally, as noted in n22, this was Aristotle's own position on the moral character of people during his day. For him, "the Many" were better than the vicious, but worse than the virtuous. For detailed discussion, see Curzer, *Aristotle and the Virtues* and my "Categorizing Character." For what it is worth, my own view is that most people have what I call "Mixed Traits" to some degree, which are cross-situationally consistent and stable over time, but are neither traditional moral virtues nor traditional moral vices. These traits are not found in ordinary folk thinking about character, and so unfortunately I cannot offer any quick examples of them. Hence to avoid needless complexity I have left them off the list above. But for details, see my *Moral Character* and *Character and Moral Psychology*.

becoming virtuous is certainly *an important* goal.[25] Second, this argument remains neutral on who is causally responsible for the Christian becoming virtuous. Perhaps the individual Christian is primarily responsible, or the church, or the Holy Spirit. Finally, note that the conclusion is only stated as a challenge. It is not stated as anything like an objection or as evidence that Christianity is false in some way. For all that has been said up to this point, it could be a challenge that is easily met.

I will try to say something more about this challenge at the end of the paper. But for now I set aside the rarity reply, and the entire negative side of situationism, to turn next to the positive story about what does influence our behavior.

3. The Positive Side of Situationism in Psychology and Philosophy

The situationist movement in psychology would not have been nearly as influential as it was, if it had offered only a negative claim like (N1) about cross-situationally consistent traits. Instead a variety of positive claims were made as well. Here I will attempt to extract the most influential and important ones.

Not only did situationists observe that people seem to exhibit a high degree of cross-situational inconsistency in their trait-relevant behavior, but this inconsistency could be brought about by subtle and seemingly insignificant changes in the situation.[26] For instance, the presence or absence of a request to hurry to another building to give a lecture made a significant difference (10 percent versus 63 percent) to whether a seminary student would stop along the way to check on someone who was slumped over against a wall seemingly in need of help.[27] Or recall that finding a dime made a significant difference (88 percent versus 4 percent) to whether a participant would subsequently help pick up dropped papers.[28]

These kinds of results tempted some psychologists to think that character traits and even our mental states and personalities all take a back seat to the demands of the situations which confront us during our daily lives. This idea gets expressed in stronger and weaker forms by situationists. An extreme version is that:

Extreme Forces: Behavior is entirely a product of situational forces. Personality does not make any causal contribution.[29]

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[25]Thus if someone were to object by saying, "What I want to do is God's will. It isn't my goal to become a virtuous person," the natural reply is, "Wait, part of God's will for your life *is* for you to become virtuous." And there is strong Biblical precedent for this reply. See, e.g., Colossians 3:12–14. Thanks to Mark Murphy for raising this objection.

[26]See Mischel, *Personality and Assessment*, 24, 177, 293; Mischel, "Toward a Cognitive Social Learning Reconceptualization of Personality," 258–259; and Ross and Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation*, 4–6, 10–11, 46–58.

[27]Darley and Batson, "'From Jerusalem to Jericho.'"

[28]Isen and Levin, "Effect of Feeling Good on Helping: Cookies and Kindness."

[29]It is not clear how many psychologists ever endorsed this extreme of a view. Skinner came close in places such as the following: "Every discovery of an event which has a part in

More restrained than this claim is that:

> *Strong Forces:* Behavior is primarily a product of situational forces. Personality only has a modest causal contribution to make.[30]

Now a Christian might worry about each of these claims, and justifiably so. For on their surface, they could pose a threat to central Christian commitments about agency, free will, and moral responsibility.

Whether they *in fact* pose such a threat would be an interesting question to consider, and a difficult one to answer. Fortunately, we can sidestep it completely. For both *Extreme Forces* and *Strong Forces* are false. This is the emerging consensus of psychologists in recent decades, and even the most prominent figure from the early days of the situationist movement, Walter Mischel, has disavowed them.[31] But if the claims are false, then Christians do not have to worry about what their potential implications might be.

One reason why they are false is that the situations that we encounter do not directly produce intentional actions on our part. Rather, their influence is *shaped by* the mental states that make up our personalities, i.e., our beliefs and desires and the interpretations that we give to situations. The causal relationship often goes in the other direction as well; our mental states have a significant impact on creating, selecting, and shaping the situations in which we find ourselves. So my behavior is directly the product of the mental forces in my psychology and only indirectly the product of situational ones (as they impact my mind), with both forces working together in an interactive relationship to produce this output.[32]

Despite this and other concerns, I do not want to be overly harsh in my assessment of the situationist's positive story about action. In fact, I think there is a thesis in the neighborhood that is perfectly reasonable to accept, and may provide a more charitable interpretation of the basic situationist idea all along:

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shaping a man's behavior seems to leave so much the less to be credited to the man himself; and as such explanations become more and more comprehensive, the contribution which may be claimed by the individual himself appears to approach zero" ("Freedom and the Control of Man," 52). But the last qualification about *approaching* zero gives him some wiggle room out of a claim like *Extreme Forces*. See also the relevant discussion in Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality*, 264, and Funder, *The Personality Puzzle*, 107. If nothing else, though, *Extreme Forces* helps to set up the next, somewhat more moderate claim, which was widely held for a time by psychologists.

[30]For similar claims and interpretations of situationism, see also Bowers, "Situationism in Psychology," 307–311, 315–316, 319, 326, 328; Epstein, "The Stability of Behavior: I. On Predicting Most of the People Much of the Time," 1099; Ross and Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation*, xiv; and Funder, *The Personality Puzzle*, 101, 112, 117.

[31]See, e.g., Mischel, *Personality and Assessment*, 298–299; Bowers, "Situationism in Psychology," 329; Ross and Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation*, 19, 154–156; and Mischel and Shoda, "Toward a Unified Theory of Personality," 233.

[32]Much more could be said about these points, but fortunately the discussion in the psychology literature is extensive. See, e.g., the works cited in the previous footnote. I have explored this and other reasons for rejecting both *Extreme* and *Strong Forces* in detail in *Character and Moral Psychology*, chapter 4.

Surprising Dispositions: The behavior of most individuals tends to be influenced by various situational forces that activate certain of our mental dispositions—certain beliefs, desires, emotions, and the like. Furthermore, the functioning of these dispositions in our minds and especially their degree of impact on behavior are often underappreciated by both ordinary people and even trained philosophers and psychologists.[33]

Here are some examples of these dispositions:

Beliefs and desires concerned with harming others in order to maintain a positive opinion of myself.[34]

Beliefs and desires concerned with harming others in order to obey instructions from a legitimate authority.[35]

Desires concerned with helping when doing so will contribute towards extending my good mood, and more so than any alternative reasonable means of doing so which is thought to be available.[36]

Desires concerned with not helping when helping is thought to potentially earn the disapproval of those observing me.[37]

Desires concerned with cheating when the benefits of cheating (significantly) outweigh the costs, while also desiring as much as possible to still be thought of as an honest person by oneself and others.[38]

Many other examples could also be given. What is going to be true of all these beliefs and desires is that they often operate unconsciously in most people, or at least the *extent* to which they are operative is often not consciously represented. For instance, it is well known that ordinary estimates of people's willingness to obey authority figures in doing horrendous actions are much lower than is reflected in actual behavior.[39] Similarly, it is widely accepted by psychologists that fear of earning the disapproval of observers plays a significant role in studies of group helping, and yet notoriously participants in those studies do not cite the role of unresponsive group members in explaining their failures to help.[40]

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[33]See also Ross and Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation*, 46; Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality*, 292; Doris, *Lack of Character*, 63n5; and Nahmias, "Autonomous Agency and Social Psychology," 172.

[34]Baumeister, Smart, and Boden, "Relation of Threatened Egoism to Violence and Aggression," 5–33.

[35]Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*.

[36]Carlson, Charlin, and Miller, "Positive Mood and Helping Behavior."

[37]Latané and Darley, *The Unresponsive Bystander*.

[38]Mazar, Amir, and Ariely, "The Dishonesty of Honest People."

[39]Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*. For additional situations where participants' predictions of their moral behavior were significantly out of line with actual behavior, see Balcetis and Dunning, "Considering the Situation."

[40]Latané and Darley, *The Unresponsive Bystander*, 124.

To clarify the thesis above a bit more in light of these examples, it is important to stress that the "surprising" part has more to do with the impact of these dispositions on our behavior, rather than with their mere existence in the first place. Most of us are likely aware that sometimes we do not want to do things like helping others when that could merit the disapproval of third parties, for instance. But what is surprising to learn is that our desires to avoid helping can have such a significant impact on our behavior, and often when we do not even realize that they are functioning in the first place. Hence I noted in formulating the claim that it is especially their degree of impact on behavior that is often under-appreciated by both ordinary people and even trained philosophers and psychologists.

But why should we believe that these Surprising Dispositions are even present in the first place in most people? Here situationists in psychology point to a number of relevant studies, three of which I already mentioned with *Dime in the Phone Booth* (supporting helping and positive mood maintenance), *Lady in Distress* (supporting not helping and disapproval avoidance) and *Obedience to Authority* (supporting harming and authority obedience). Let's not forget *Bathroom* either, as the study is used to support the existence and influence of a Surprising Disposition related to helping and relieving feelings of embarrassment.[41]

Naturally we can question the inferences involved from the data in these studies to the psychological dispositions that are used to explain their results. But psychologists are not positing such dispositions on the basis of just one study—dozens of studies can be cited as empirical support for each disposition or set of dispositions. Hence my view is that psychologists have indeed provided us with ample empirical evidence to support the claim that there are many Surprising Dispositions which are widely held and which, when activated or triggered, can have a signifi-cant impact on our thoughts, motivation, and behavior.[42]

With this new claim in *Surprising Dispositions* now on the table, does it pose any trouble for central commitments of Christianity? Trouble might indeed be lurking in the area of moral responsibility and agency. I con-sider one potential source of trouble in the next section.

4. Surprising Dispositions and Agency

Suppose that our Surprising Dispositions were to threaten moral respon-sibility, such that in cases when an action is caused to some degree by one of these dispositions, the agent is to that extent not responsible for that action. And suppose that the Surprising Dispositions are widespread and frequently causally active. Then moral responsibility would be seriously diminished. Presumably that would be a conclusion that is unaccept-able to Christians. For surely on the Christian view, human beings are

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[41]Cann and Blackwelder, "Compliance and Mood."

[42]For detailed discussion, see my *Moral Character* and *Character and Moral Psychology*.

significantly morally responsible most of the time when they lie, cheat, steal, assault, rape, or murder—or on the flip side, when they keep their promises, tell the truth, love a stranger, or voluntarily sacrifice their lives for a good cause. Surely Christians want to say that we should be held accountable to a significant degree for such actions, at least in most cases, both by other humans and most of all by God.

Why might our Surprising Dispositions threaten moral responsibility? One way is via the role of unconscious processing.[43] Here is an attempt to spell out the connection:

(1) Free and/or morally responsible actions require expressions of agency.[44]

(2) Agential behavior is caused by thoughts which, minimally, are conscious.[45]

(3) Situationism supports the claim that much of our behavior is caused by (or at least significantly causally influenced by) thoughts which are unconscious, including much of our behavior that pertains to matters of ethics such as lying, cheating stealing, helping, and the like.[46]

(4) Therefore, we are justified in believing that much of our behavior, including much of our behavior that pertains to matters of ethics, is not free and/or morally responsible.[47] Or, if it is, the degree to which that behavior is free and/or morally responsible is significantly diminished from what we ordinarily assume.

This is meant to be a general reconstruction of how a certain line of reasoning often goes, while acknowledging that there are differences in the

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[43]This is by no means the *only* possible way. Dan Moller and Frances Howard-Snyder, for instance, have suggested to me that in light of our Surprising Dispositions, there might be serious concerns having to do with luck and moral responsibility. Elsewhere I have also considered whether our Surprising Dispositions pose a threat to moral responsibility on a reasons-responsive approach (see Nelkin, "Freedom, Responsibility and the Challenge of Situationism," and my "Situationism and Free Will"). Due to limitations of space, I unfortunately cannot consider all of these possibilities here. What follows in the text above, though, strikes me as the most serious potential threat.

[44]In discussions of situationism in the philosophy literature, it is customary to lump talk of freedom and moral responsibility together, and I follow this convention here. See, e.g., Nelkin "Freedom, Responsibility and the Challenge of Situationism," 183n6.

[45]A commitment to something like this premise can be found in the work of Harry Frankfurt, Michael Bratman, Eleonore Stump, David Velleman, and Laura Ekstrom. For an extensive list of references, see my "Identifying with our Desires." Admittedly, in recent years support for this premise has waned, no doubt in part because of increased familiarity with research in psychology.

[46]Some formulations of this premise would add that not only are the thoughts unconscious, but if the agent were to be aware of them, then she would reject them in light of her conscious principles and values. See, e.g., Nahmias, "Autonomous Agency and Social Psychology," 170.

[47]Or at least we are not justified in believing that it is.

details. Sometimes the argument is put in terms of "agency," as above, and sometimes it is put in terms of "personhood" or "autonomy."[48] The standards in question for agential behavior vary somewhat in the literature on situationism and responsibility too—consciousness of the thoughts giving rise to the behavior is one proposed requirement, and others mentioned in this context include self-conscious reflection, accurate self-reflection, reflective self-direction, reflectively chosen principles, or knowledge of reasons.[49] Regardless of these differences, if it were to turn out that our behavior is significantly causally influenced by unconscious psychological states, then on all these proposals, we would not be free and responsible in those particular instances, or at least our freedom/responsibility would be much diminished.[50]

Some of the experiments linked to situationism certainly lend support to the role of unconscious processing. As already noted, participants in group-effect studies such as *Lady in Distress* typically deny that the presence of the confederate had any role to play in their not helping.[51] People emerging from the bathroom presumably were unaware of the influence of embarrassment relief, as were people similarly unaware of the role of positive mood maintenance in *Dime in the Phone Book*. The situationist claim in *Surprising Dispositions* is a reflection of these particular studies, but also of hundreds of others which call attention to psychological dispositions that are not well appreciated but which can and often do work at the unconscious level in morally relevant ways.[52]

Potential trouble could lurk here for the Christian, as (4) does not seem compatible with central Christian commitments, especially when it comes to responsibility before God. But the natural response for the Christian to make, and the one that philosophers would likely make anyway regardless of their religious commitments, is to just reject premise (2) and broaden the standards required for agential behavior so that unconscious mental states can still give rise to genuine actions, at least provided certain conditions are also satisfied. What would not be necessary (although it may still be sufficient) would be the satisfaction of more sophisticated requirements that would not be met in the cases that are of interest here, such as acts of reflection, having conscious awareness of reasons, performing

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[48]For agency, see Doris, "Skepticism about Persons"; Vargas, "Situationism and Moral Responsibility," 330; and especially Mele and Shepherd, "Situationism and Agency." For personhood, see Doris, "Skepticism about Persons." For autonomy, see Nahmias, "Autonomous Agency and Social Psychology."

[49]Nahmias, "Autonomous Agency and Social Psychology," 170–171; Doris, "Skepticism about Persons," 59–60; and Mele and Shepherd, "Situationism and Agency," 62.

[50]Nahmias, "Autonomous Agency and Social Psychology"; Doris, "Skepticism about Persons"; and Baumeister, Masicampo, and Vohs, "Do Conscious Thoughts Cause Behavior?," 333.

[51]Latané and Darley, *The Unresponsive Bystander*, 124.

[52]Such results link up with a larger literature in social psychology on unconscious automaticity. I have explored some of these connections in *Moral Character*.

second-order conscious assessments of desires, forming higher-order voli-
tions, engaging in self-conscious deliberation, or the like.

There are a number of ways to develop this strategy, and here is not the
place to try to review them. To take one example, a straightforward pro-
posal would be to require only counterfactual endorsement, or roughly
the idea that if the agent in question *were* to be made aware of the mental
states which had unconsciously given rise to her action, then for her ac-
tion to be an expression of her agency, she would reflectively endorse
those states (or do whatever else the correct standard is supposed to be on
proposals which require conscious access to the processing that goes into
behavior).[53] Another proposal, which I myself have developed in some
detail, is to require that there be a subconscious cognitive process which
pairs the causally relevant unconscious mental states with the agent's most
important relevant norms, and when doing so, does not return the output
that there is an inconsistency between the two. In other words, there is
psychological harmony between the agent's values and the particular de-
sires, intentions, and so forth, even if she is not consciously aware of their
presence in the moment.[54]

Regardless of the prospects for these particular proposals, developing
a strategy in this ballpark is one of the most worthwhile research areas in
contemporary philosophy of action. And it is an area that Christians can
fruitfully explore.

Suppose, then, that an account of responsible, agential behavior can be
developed which is compatible with the causal influence of Surprising Dis-
positions. The Christian can thereby continue to be justified in believing
in free and morally responsible actions even when those dispositions are
at work. But a new concern now arises. Instead of focusing on the status
of the action that is performed, this new concern focuses on the agent's
ability to *report* what his or her reasons were for so acting. To see the con-
cern, I need to do a bit of stage-setting.

In contrast to rationalist approaches which dominated moral psy-
chology several decades ago, there has been a robust consensus in the
psychology literature that most of our moral judgments and subsequent
actions are not preceded by a process of conscious deliberation. So when
I express a particular moral judgment, perhaps by saying, "Leaving the
children in the car for two hours in the sweltering parking lot was wrong,"
it is rare that I would have given the matter much conscious thought be-
forehand; rather the judgment just spontaneously arises within me, and
then I act by (in this case) verbally expressing it. So it has seemed to many
psychologists recently that the following is true:

[53]See Bratman, "Identification, Decision, and Treating as a Reason," 204 for a similar ap-
proach.

[54]See my "Identifying with Our Desires." For another approach, see Doris, *Lack of Char-
acter*, 140–142 and his critical discussion of reflective approaches to agency in "Skepticism
about Persons."

> *Absence of Conscious Reasoning:* Moral judgments are typically not caused by a prior process of conscious moral reasoning or deliberation that led to the formation of those judgments.[55]

What about after the judgment is made? At that point if you asked me why I took such a stance on the wrongness of the children's treatment, I can easily cite all kinds of both general and more specific moral principles ("Children should not suffer," "Leaving children unattended in cars is wrong," "It was cruel of that parent to abandon his children in the car," and so on). So it seems that the following is also true:

> *Post-Judgment Conscious Reasoning:* People often engage in conscious moral reasoning and appeal to various reasons and principles after they have formed a moral judgment.[56]

Given this background, the new concern arising from the influence of our Surprising Dispositions can now be introduced. For a threat of skepticism looms about whether our appeals to reasons and principles are veridical.

Recall that when our Surprising Dispositions are causally active in moral judgment formation and subsequent behavior, it is rare that we would cite them after the fact when justifying our judgments. We already said that participants in the early group effect studies did not cite the role of unresponsive group members in explaining their failures to help. In fact, they tended to cite all kinds of reasons *other than* what were some of the most causally operative ones.[57] Perhaps there will be occasions where, having studied psychology in school for instance, we might recognize the contribution that a Surprising Disposition made in a given instance of judgment formation. But these occasions will not be the norm.

To make things more concrete, consider the bathroom situation again from Cann and Blackwelder's study. Suppose you are exiting the bathroom, and are approached to carry some papers down the hallway. And suppose that you find yourself immediately forming the judgment that you should help the stranger in this way. Later, when asked why you thought that you should do this, you respond by saying that it is important to do

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[55]See, e.g., Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail," 818–820 and Haidt and Bjorklund, "Social Intuitionists Answer Six Questions about Moral Psychology," 189. We can follow Haidt and Bjorklund's account of a conscious process as a process which is "intentional, effortful, and controllable and that the reasoner is aware that it is going on" (189; see also Haidt, "The Emotional Dog," 818).

The scope of this claim about moral judgments is meant to range broadly, so as to include first-person, second-person, and third-person moral judgments, as well as moral judgments about the past, present, and future. Clearly there will be individual differences in such matters—some people might consciously deliberate more about the moral behavior of third parties than they do about what they themselves should do, for instance.

Having said this, the main focus in the rest of the paper will be on first- and third-person moral judgments concerning present actions.

[56]See, e.g., Haidt and Bjorklund, "Social Intuitionists," 189.

[57]Latané and Darley, *The Unresponsive Bystander*, 124. See also Nisbett and Wilson, "Telling More Than We Can Know," 241, who cite the group effect research in the context of making similar points to what follows.

kind things for others from time to time, and this was one such time. As a matter of fact, though, what primarily caused you to form this judgment was a desire to relieve embarrassment together with a belief that helping to carry the papers would serve as a reasonable means to do so. These mental states were causally operative at the unconscious level, though, and so you did not recognize the robust role that they played.

In such an instance, you would be guilty of confabulating. The justifiers for the judgment that you do cite did not in fact play a causal role; you made up a role for them that they did not actually play. And this could be true for a number of our moral judgments and actions.

Now this is not quite the skeptical worry I have in mind, although widespread confabulation itself would be bad news indeed. But the skeptical worry is that, given the reasonable possibility of such confabulation, our *justification* is threatened for thinking that we have accurately discerned our reasons for judgment and action. More precisely:

> *Skepticism about our Reasons for Forming Moral Judgments:* Given the frequently unconscious causal role of Surprising Dispositions, in any given instance where a moral judgment is formed spontaneously and immediately without conscious deliberation, the agent in question has no reasonable basis upon which to discern what her actual reasons were for forming the judgment.

So in the bathroom example, I would have no reasonable basis upon which to discern whether my judgment in favor of helping stemmed from a moral principle or a desire to alleviate feelings of embarrassment (or both). Each could adequately explain why I formed the judgment, and yet the role of each is outside my conscious purview. I am left in the dark as to which one was really at work.[58]

Now one *could* figure this out. For instance, one could put oneself in other situations where the moral principle would apply but no embarrassment is involved, and then see whether the principle gives rise to the same judgment. But clearly this is not a *reasonable* approach for ordinary people to engage in so as to discern their true motivating reasons. For one thing, it would be extremely time-consuming to try and implement. Not to mention that even if one did discern what the true motivating reasons were in a particular instance, the same question will arise all over again for the *next* morally relevant situation which one confronts, perhaps just a few more minutes later in the day. Hence one's entire day could easily become consumed with following this approach.

Note that the above claim allows that sometimes our moral principles *really did* do the causal work in generating a moral judgment. Surprising

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[58]For a similar concern, see Doris, *Lack of Character*, 139. For related discussion, see Brink, "Situationism, Responsibility, and Fair Opportunity," 142 and, in psychology, the very interesting studies and relevant discussion in Uhlmann, Pizarro, Tannenbaum, and Ditto, "The Motivated Use of Moral Principles," 476–491, especially 489. I develop these themes in more detail in Miller, "Assessing Two Competing Approaches to the Psychology of Moral Judgments."

Dispositions had no role to play. Objectively speaking, if the person accurately reports these moral principles, then he is not confabulating. But this is beside the point in this discussion, since we are wondering about questions of *epistemic justification*. Whatever the psychological reality might be, the actor at the time won't have any reasonable way of determining it and so will not be justified in believing that his principles were causally responsible. In citing those principles, he may be right on a given occasion in thinking that they were the main causes, but this would only be because he was lucky and his belief was correct *by accident*.[59] He is not able to reliably track the truth in this regard. Hence there will be other cases where it also seems equally as clear that principles were causally responsible, but in fact now it was the Surprising Dispositions that were. And he would not be able to tell the two cases apart from the inside, at least using any reasonable means in his ordinary daily life.

What follows normatively if the skeptical claim above is correct? The main lesson I see is that rather than forming beliefs about what the reasons are for why we make our spontaneous moral judgments, we should instead withhold offering any such reasons, unless we can reliably discern whether it was principles or Surprising Dispositions that are doing the causal work. Since most of us cannot reliably discern this in any reasonable way, it follows that most of us should be agnostic about why we make the particular moral judgments we do.

Let me clarify this claim about withholding some more. The main lesson is *not* that we should give up our spontaneously formed moral judgments. It can still be appropriate for me to believe that leaving the children in the car for two hours was wrong. Furthermore, it is *not* that we should refrain from subsequently thinking about, and offering to others, a variety of important justificatory reasons for our spontaneous moral judgments. I might, after the fact, cite the suffering of the children and the high risk of death as reasons for why it was wrong to leave them in the car. And those might be exactly the reasons for why such behavior is, *in fact*, morally wrong. But what I *should* refrain from doing, according to the above line of reasoning, is think (and report to others) that these justificatory reasons were the actual reasons *for which* I formed the moral judgment in the first place. They *might* have been. Or instead the judgment might have been formed primarily due to one or more Surprising Dispositions. Or perhaps it arose from a basic disgust reaction. Since we are typically not in a reasonable position to figure this out, the normative recommendation is that we should refrain from reporting on why we formed our moral judgments in these cases.

This is a radically revisionary consequence. If followed, it would make for a sharp departure from the phenomenological experience of effortlessly citing various reasons for which (we think) we made our moral judgments. I suspect it is also a consequence that would be very difficult

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[59]For a similar idea in the psychological literature, see Nisbett and Wilson, "Telling More Than We Can Know," 233.

to implement in practice—we just naturally and spontaneously offer such reasons to ourselves and others. Finally, it is a consequence that Christians might be loath to accept. But for all that it still seems to be the correct consequence to draw at this point.

So have we finally arrived at a deeply troubling consequence of situationism for Christianity? Here I grant that we have arrived at a deeply troubling consequence. But it is not a consequence that is deeply troubling for Christians *qua Christians*. In other words, there is nothing specific about Christian commitments themselves that plays a role in this skeptical outcome. Rather, this is (or at least should be) a deeply troubling consequence *for all of us*, regardless of our religious outlooks.

So once again Christians, at least *qua* Christians, are able to emerge from this discussion fairly unscathed, albeit perhaps at the same time joining others in feeling uneasy.

5. Tying the Negative and Positive Stories Together

We have seen that there are many different claims associated with situationism in both philosophy and psychology, and also many different implications that could be drawn from them. Throughout this paper, I have tried to suggest some defensive maneuvers that Christians could use in order to avoid the potentially troubling implications. In the process, a picture of moral psychology has begun to emerge which has the following parameters:

> Most people today do not have the moral virtues such as honesty or compassion.

> Most people today do not have the moral vices such as dishonesty or cruelty.

> Instead, most people today tend to be influenced by various situational forces, which can activate certain of their mental dispositions the functioning and degree of impact of which on behavior are often underappreciated.

> Despite the frequent lack of conscious awareness about their functioning and degree of impact, these dispositions are such that we can still exhibit agency when we act on the basis of them and be morally responsible for those actions.

> But in cases where we do not engage in conscious deliberation before forming a moral judgment and acting, most people have no reasonable basis upon which to discern what their actual reasons were for forming the judgment.

It seems to me that this picture is one that can be reasonably accepted by Christians, in the sense that none of their other Christian commitments need conflict with it.

Indeed, it could be argued that this picture is what one might *expect* from a moral psychology informed by a reading of the New Testament. Consider, for instance, the following passages:

> For everything God created is good. (1 Timothy 4:1)

> There is no one righteous, not even one. (Romans 3:10)

> I do not understand what I do. (Romans 7:15)

> Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. (Romans 7:20)

> I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind. (Romans 7:23)

> He [the Lord] will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God. (1 Corinthians 3:10)

> The spirit is willing, but the body is weak. (Matthew 26: 41)

> For the word of God . . . judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Hebrews 4:8)

In fact, the picture of moral psychology outlined by the New Testament seems to fit much more comfortably with the latest empirical research than do many other pictures outlined in the history of both philosophy and psychology, especially in the rationalist tradition.

And not only does the New Testament seem to outline an empirically viable approach to moral psychology, it also describes various resources for improvement too. These resources can be marshalled as a basis for addressing the challenge I raised in Section 2. Recall that the key premise of that challenge was the following:

> (3) Christians need to outline realistic and empirically informed ways for most Christians to improve on their non-virtuous character, and, at least as far as the situationist literature is concerned, so far they have not done so.

Here is not the place to try to outline a Christian approach to character improvement, but let me at least mention three particular resources that seem worth special consideration by Christians in light of the situationist literature.[60]

The first is the emphasis on positive rituals and practices. When carried out in the appropriate ways and in the right contexts, they can mold a Christian's psychology in such a way as to foster the formation of virtuous habits. More specifically, they can both help direct her attention to the relevant moral considerations and orient her motives in the right way to respond to them. Familiar examples include praying, contemplating scrip-

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[60]In the next two paragraphs I have benefitted from unpublished work by Rico Vitz.

ture and the life of the saints, fasting, confessing sins, giving to charity, tithing to the church, and volunteering. Through repeated practice, these behaviors can become automatic, and can override Surprising Dispositions that might motivate action in an opposing direction.

But this performance of rituals and practices does not typically happen alone in a Christian's life. Rather, such practices are carried out liturgically in a social context. Christians pray together, read scripture together, confess together, and even discipline each other together. Throughout the long process of character formation, the Christian can benefit from the advice, experience, and admonitions of others, especially but not only the church leaders.

Admittedly, it is an empirical question whether these approaches to character improvement are actually efficacious. Here is not the place to review the relevant experimental literature, which unfortunately is fairly thin. Instead my only claim for now is that these approaches make sense from a Christian perspective and are not threatened, as far as I can see, by the reasonable lessons to be drawn from the situationist literature.

Finally, there is the internal working of the Holy Spirit. It has been a traditional claim of Christian thinking that the Holy Spirit is active in some way in the life of the believer to causally affect the process of character development and sanctification. Exactly what form such involvement takes is a controversial and perhaps ultimately inscrutable matter,[61] but presumably one contribution the Holy Spirit can make is to address the deepest recesses of the Christian's mind and work towards weakening the influence of non-virtuous moral dispositions.

So it turns out that Christians, far from being threatened by the news from situationist psychology and philosophy, may be uniquely poised to address some of the additional challenges from situationism which, it now seems, we all must face in trying to become people of virtue.[62]

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[61]For an excellent discussion, see Alston, "The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit."

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