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Professor JeeLoo Liu

[Handout #5]
Rachana Kamtekar: Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of our Character

§ Main Theses

1. The experiments which find character traits to correlate poorly with behavior rely on a very particular conception of a character trait: as an isolable and non-rational disposition to manifest a given stereotypical behavior that differs from the behavior of others and is fairly situation insensitive. This is not the conception of character or virtue according to traditional virtue ethics.

Situationist's Conception of Character Traits	Virtue Ethicist's Conception of Character Traits
Isolated, single traits	Holistic
Distinctive (something that distinguishes an individual and her behavior from others and their behavior)	General traits
Broad-based (across a range of situations)	Situational variation depending on the agent's judgment of the situation (involving practical wisdom)
Explanatory	Evaluative as well as explanatory
Necessitating and can be used in predicting behavior	Not necessitating, and is used in guiding action
Non-rational	Virtues require knowledge

2. If situationism is true, then the answer to the practical question "what can I do to take charge of my situation?" is "nothing"— the features of situations that determine behavior are so subtle and surprising that no ordinary rational strategies could enable us to be masters of our situations. But such pessimism is premature, and if it were ever to become warranted, then it is not only virtue ethics and the notion of character that we would have to jettison, but the power of practical reasoning.

§ Kamtekar's Main Argument:

1. The character traits conceived of and debunked by situationist social psychological studies have very little to do with character as it is conceived of in traditional virtue ethics.
2. The so-called character traits that the situationist experiments test for are independently functioning dispositions to behave in stereotypical ways, dispositions that are isolated from how people reason.
3. By contrast, the conception of character in virtue ethics is holistic and inclusive of how we reason: it is a person's character as a whole (rather than isolated character traits), that explains her actions, and this character is a more-or-less consistent, more-or-less integrated, set of motivations, including the person's desires, beliefs about the world, and ultimate goals and values.
4. Therefore, situationism cannot refute the hypothesis of character traits in traditional virtue ethics.

§ Summary of Kamtekar's Critique of Situationism

1. Change social policies to create virtue-inducing situations ➔ But this is a dangerous practice.
2. As individuals, we should avoid situations that will tempt us to behave in ways we do not want to. ➔ But how can we avoid all those situations that may lead to problematic behavior on our part?

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§ [Situationism]

1. Situationist social psychologists tell us that information about people's distinctive character traits, opinions, attitudes, values, or past behavior is not as useful for determining what they will do as is information about the details of their situations.
2. Under experimental conditions, people's behavior is not found to be cross-situationally consistent. Instead, across a range of situations, the person's behavior tends to converge on the behavioral norm for those situations.
3. Therefore, people's situations, rather than their characters, are the explanatorily powerful factors in determining why different people behave differently.

Gilbert Harman:
1. Ordinary attributions of character-traits to people may be deeply misguided, and it may even be the case that there is no such thing as character.
2. If there is no such thing as character, then there is no such thing as character building.
3. So, moral philosophers ought to abandon character-based virtue ethics.

John Doris:
1. Our dispositions to distinctive behaviors are narrow rather than broad.
2. These narrow dispositions are not integrated.
3. Therefore, moral philosophy should turn away from virtue ethics and seek a moral theory and practical ideals that are possible for creatures like us.

§ Kamtekar's Critique of Experiment Findings

1. Two situations may seem relevantly similar to an experimenter but not so to the subjects of the experiment, so the experiments may not truly show the significance of situational factors.
2. The inclusion of subjective construal in situation blurs the intuitive sharpness of the distinction between situation and character, since how we construe a situation may also be part of our character.
3. In their exclusive attention to behavior, the psychological studies implicitly conceive of a character trait as something that will determine behavior in isolation from other character traits, thoughts, concerns, and so forth a person might have in a given situation. This is an unreasonable expectation.
4. Even our lay understanding of character doesn't ordinarily lead us to expect that someone whom we may legitimately call helpful will display actions of the helpful type (whatever that type of action is) *on every occasion*, and so we wouldn't conclude from one failure to help that a person lacks the character trait of helpfulness.
5. The expectation that a character trait can operate in isolation— suggested by the psychologists' testing for character variables in isolation—seems to be quite implausible. Rather than isolating character variables and testing for their manifestations in behavior, social psychologists need to engage in more painstaking research that takes into account how the considerations experimental subjects have in mind might involve various character traits and how these might interact.

§ The Situationist Conception of Character Traits ≠ The Virtue Ethicist's Conception of Character Traits

I. The Situationist's Conception of Character Traits:

1. *Character traits are supposed to be distinctive*: a character trait is by definition something that distinguishes an individual and her behavior from others and their behavior.
2. *Character traits are broad-based*: characters are dispositions to behave in distinctive ways across a range of situations.

➔ Character traits are supposed to be a stable, long-term disposition to behave in distinctive ways across a range of situations.

II. The Virtue Ethicist's Conception of Character Traits

1. According to traditional virtue ethicists, virtues are not dispositions to perform stereotypical actions popularly associated with a given trait but, rather, dispositions to *respond appropriately*—in judgment, feeling, and action— *to one's situation*. So there is already a build-in sensitivity to situations.
2. Traditional virtue ethicists use character attributions *evaluatively* as well as

explanatorily, and this evaluative use of character terms figures prominently in traditional virtue ethics discussions of character.

3. The best way to understand most of our character talk seems to be, in Bernard Williams's terms, as "thick ethical concepts": notions that are at the same time descriptive, or world guided, and prescriptive, or action guiding. This is not the same as the Situationist's thin notion.

III. Virtue Ethics on 'Virtue'

1. Virtue = "a disposition issuing in decisions, depending on the intermediacy of the kind relative to us, this being determined by rational prescription and in the way in which the wise person would determine it."
2. Aristotle does not treat virtues and vices as necessitating particular kinds of behavior but, rather, as tendencies that incline us to behave as we do.
3. Aristotle insists that it is not possible to have virtue without practical wisdom, which is the disposition to deliberate well about what conduces to the good life in general.
4. Virtues require knowledge. On this picture, the virtues (properly speaking) cannot be dispositions merely to face danger, or to give aid to others, or to resist temptations, because what Aristotle and his audience are interested in are dispositions to do these things appropriately—with the right goal in mind, in relation to the right objects, in the right manner, and so on.
5. According to Aristotle, we begin to acquire the virtues of character by a process of habituation – not just any repeated action will stamp itself on the soul; rather, if it is to engage our motivation, the action must be seen by us as good for us.
6. According to Plato, each character learns the values that guide his or her actions from a particular cultural environment, sometimes through the mechanism of familial and peer pressure. In the absence of wisdom, our characters just are dispositions to behave reliably in those situations for which our upbringing has prepared us.

§ Virtue Ethicists' Strategies for Character Building

1. **Role model:** the adoption of a personal role model as one's ideal.
2. **Vivid thought experiment:** to imagine yourself in situations that will test your commitment to your values and think of how you want to respond.
3. **Imaginary ethical deliberation:** This kind of theoretical meditation on ethical deliberation is necessary to avoid complacency, crowd following, accepting the constraints on one's action generated by others' expectations of one and other such social cues, and in general inappropriately unreflective behavior.
4. **Aiming for consistency in life**: Consistency in all areas of one's life may be psychologically easier to achieve than being consistent in just one area.

§ Developmental Psychology: Social-Cognitive Theory

1. It acknowledges situational variability.
2. It understands behavior as a *function of each person's cognitive-affective personality system*: the organization of beliefs, feelings, goals, competencies, and strategies that is supposed to support stable and distinctive patterns of intra-individual variability in behavior.
3. It focuses on coherence and continuity of personality, rather than strict consistency.

§ Final Summary

The globalist conception of *character*:	The situationist conception of *character*:	The Social-cognitivist conception of *character*:
(i) **Consistency**. (ii) **Stability** (iii) **Evaluative integration**	(i) **No consistency across different situations.** (ii) **Stability in similar situations.** (iii) **Fragmented (context-bound) character traits.**	(i) **Consistency is relative to standards** (ii) **Continuity** (iii) **Coherence (Evaluative integration diachronically)**