Virtue in Action: Predictors of Helping Behavior and the Situationist Debate

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Abstract

According to a new theory of virtue, retrospective virtue, one can become virtuous by going through a process of reflection on past experiences and behavior which allows one to make better choices about which situations to enter, and ultimately, allows one to develop a awareness of situational pressures that overcomes their influence. Unhindered by these pressures one is free to act virtuously. Helping behavior offers empirical evidence of virtue, as one would expect to observe in a virtuous person. An experiment involving college students investigated possible predictors of helping behavior. Students were provided with an opportunity to help a confederate student pick up papers and then were asked to complete self reports on potential helping behavior predictors including agreeableness, virtue, application of learned material (in social/personality psychology or introduction to psychology) to their everyday life, and situation strength. According to the theorized model of retrospective virtue, perceived situation strength and self-reports of application of material, especially from social and personality psychology students should be the best predictors. Individually application of class material to everyday life and which class students had taken were not good predictors alone but only assisted as part of the composite and personality had to removed from the composite as it was not a good predictor by itself or with the others. Because most participants helped and situation strength was a good predictor of helping behavior, this study did show support for situationism. But, the results also supported retrospective virtue, showing the model to be a good predictor, especially virtue and situation strength.
Virtue in Action: Predictors of Helping Behavior and the Situationist Debate

Virtue ethics has, since the times of Aristotle, held that there are intrinsic characteristics of individuals that one can cultivate over time towards, making oneself more virtuous in thought and action. With the advent of personality theory it almost looked as though virtue ethics had empirical support for this position (though virtue ethicists neither felt they needed nor wanted this empirical support). Personality psychologists found empirical evidence to support the idea that individual variation in personality existed and could be categorized into traits (McCrae and Costa 1987, 1992). The common ground of these two theories, that there is something intrinsic to individuals that governs their view of themselves, thoughts, and actions, came into question when a large number of social psychological studies suggested that variability in situations more than variability in individuals has the power to predict behavior (Darley and Baston 1973, Isen and Levin 1972, Milgram 1963, Zimbardo 1971).

From these social psychological studies came a new view called situationism, bringing together philosophers and psychologists. According to this view, virtue and personality have predictive power only insofar as the situational pressures allow these characteristics to be exhibited in action. While character traits localized to particular situations might exist, the idea of a robust character or virtue was strictly out. This bleak conclusion could have spelled the end to virtue ethics, but with a new way of understanding virtue, a retrospective path to virtue, it is possible to explain that situationist studies show that most people can be influenced by situational pressures, not that all people are or that only the situation has explanatory power towards an individual’s behavior. This experiment offers evidence for a retrospective view of virtue development and against the situationists and personality theorists.

Virtue Ethics
Virtue ethics describes how a person ought to live and act, focusing on the moral character of a person (Merritt, 2000; 370), and how to achieve this goal. Modern virtue ethics is primarily based on the works of Aristotle. He believed that all people try to do the right thing, but that often individuals fail because they have yet to develop an ideal state of virtue. In any given situation the thing to ask is: what would the perfectly virtuous person do? Aristotle thought of virtues as the proper balance between a deficit and an excess of a particular trait. For example, the virtue of courage is the mean between cowardice and foolhardiness. What this mean looks like will vary from person to person and instance to instance. Aristotle considered each virtue\(^1\) to be unique, but unable to exist apart from the others. Developing virtue is a process of finding the correct mean in every aspect of being a good person.

To have a virtuous character, one must cultivate it. Virtue is like a craft that one must practice to develop moral skills. Through practice, virtue is honed to the best ability of the individual. This is a lifelong task: Aristotle sees children as somewhat ignorant; it is only through education and experience that virtue can be developed to the point where mistakes regarding the moral course of action are minimal (Aristotle, 1995; 1142 a). Through habituation\(^2\), virtues become deeply entrenched, expressed both in thought and action in any situation. Virtue should be expressed in both these ways because the virtuous person should not have desires which conflict with what is good. For example, it is not as virtuous to resist temptation as to not be tempted (Nussbaum, 2004; 4).

\(^1\) There is some debate as to how to pinpoint what characterizes a person as having a particular virtue; Gopal Sreenivasan (2002) makes this point in his paper “Errors about Errors.” In his opinion, virtues are seen most clearly enacted in virtue relevant behavior (57). Therefore it is only when there is a clearly correct course of action and a clearly wrong one that a person’s behavior indicates possession of a virtue.

\(^2\) Note that this is habituation as virtue ethicists use the term. Habituation here refers to practicing a skill until it becomes a habit, like brushing one’s teeth or making a bed. This is contrasted with the psychological usage of habituation where it refers to a decreased behavioral response to a stimulus upon repeated exposure to it.
It is not enough to cultivate only virtue. Virtue and practical wisdom are intrinsically connected; without this intelligence, virtue would be meaningless, unable to be carried out in action. Practical wisdom can be cultivated alongside virtue in much the same way as virtue is honed. Practical wisdom makes clear the salient details of a specific situation, pointing out what could be acted upon, what point of action would be most virtuous, and how to carry out that action. Virtue is habit relevant to morality, while practical wisdom is the ability to determine when and how to practice virtue.

Aristotle’s aim in discussing virtue is to describe what makes a person the most excellent example of humanity. Achieving a habituated state of virtue and practical wisdom allows a person to become the best sort of person he or she can be. For this reason, virtue is worth cultivating. In a given situation there are any number of possible actions; developing virtue and practical wisdom will allow a person to make the right kinds of decisions and to carry out the right sorts of actions.

**Personality Theory**

Personality is a subfield within psychology. Researchers in the field of personality psychology study their similarities and differences in individuals (McAdams & Pals, 2006). Unlike the normative emphasis of virtue ethics, personality theories describe the observed tendencies of individuals; how they are instead of how they ought to be. This field involves the study of how a person behaves, and why they behave that way, and how they came to be that way. Personality psychology has struggled to create theories that are both comprehensive and testable. Trait theory\(^3\) is one of the few that has overcome both of these issues, leading to its popularity as a theory of personality.

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\(^3\) This is not to discount other personality theories, some of which can arguably be called trait theory as well, that have also successfully grappled with these demands. For the purposes of this paper and framing the situationist debate trait theory is the most used and accepted form
A personality trait encompasses something enduring, distinctive, and explains the tendencies of individuals (Cervone & Pervin, 2008; 8). Trait theory began with Gordon Allport, Raymond Cattell, and Hans Eysenck. The commonly used five-factor model (Costa & McCrae, 1992) is based upon their work. The five-factor model looks at these dimensions: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness, which taken together are meant to explain the behavior and dispositions of individuals. For each trait there should be a correspondence between the individual possessing the trait and the person’s trait-relevant actions (Cervone & Pervin, 2008; 241). In this way an individual’s self-report, other’s assessment of them, and their actions should cohere and reflect the person’s personality characteristics.

Situationist Studies

Both virtue ethics and personality psychology rely on the concept that there is something intrinsic to a person that becomes manifest in their behavior. A number of social psychological studies have called this assumption into question. Milgram and Zimbardo’s infamous studies show how situational pressures can transform individuals and push them to act completely out of character. Darley and Baston, and Isen and Levin’s work illustrate how small changes in the environment can impact the actions of individuals in subtle but troubling ways.

Milgram (1963) studied obedience by creating a situation where the participants were asked by an authority figure to do something that they would not want to do; namely, harming another person. Participants thought they had an equal chance of being learner or teacher; they thought they were administering painful shock for each wrong answer given, but in actuality the person in the other room was a confederate with a script of responses.

of personality theory that also has the most to loose if the situationist points are uniformly accepted, but more on that later.
Milgram found that while participants apparently experienced a great deal of internal conflict, they continued in a line of action completely disconnected from their own morals. In surveys Milgram administered before conducting his experiments, students and colleagues alike predicted that individuals would eventually stop obeying and call a halt to the study. In actuality, a majority of participants (26 out of 40, which is 65 percent as compared to the 1.2 percent those surveyed had predicted) administered the highest shock value, showing the power of situational pressures in eliciting obedience behavior.

Zimbardo’s (1971) experiment found equally startling results. By taking ordinary young men and providing them with uniforms, props, and a prison setting, he created an environment with strength no one expected. Guards with only a basic training became cruel and sadistic in a matter of days. Prisoners showed a loss of identity, and an overall sense of hopelessness. Even Zimbardo himself admits to having felt himself transformed by the situation (Zimbardo, 2004; 49). The experiment was supposed to last two weeks, but after only six days one of his students insisted that the experiment be discontinued.

Slightly smaller in both dramatic effect and reputation are Isen and Levin’s (1972) and Darley and Baston’s (1973) studies of helping behavior. Isen and Levin conducted two studies, both improving affect to study resulting differences in helping behavior. They first provided some students with a free cookie, while giving others nothing. Students were then either asked if they would participate in an experiment by annoying another participant or if they would participate by acting as someone’s muse in an experiment. Students given cookies were more likely to volunteer to be someone’s muse, while students who had not received cookies were more likely to volunteer to annoy. Their second study used coins instead of cookies to improve affect. Individuals on the street went into a phone booth to make a call. Some found nothing; others found a coin in the return slot. After exiting the booth, confederate walked by, ‘accidentally’ dropping sheath of papers. Those who had just found a coin were
more likely to help pick up the dropped papers, while those who had not found a coin were more likely to walk right over the fallen papers. Thus exhibiting that small changes in affect influence individual’s exhibited virtue.

Darley and Baston turned to the story of the Good Samaritan for inspiration in their study. Their participants were seminary students who were given the opportunity to help when passing a confederate slumped over in a doorway. First, they surveyed the participant’s type of religiosity and then had them prepare a speech: some subjects prepared a speech on Parable of the Good Samaritan; others prepared a speech on an unrelated topic. Their motivation for doing so was to have only some of the participants reminded of the value of helping others. It turned out, however, that the best predictor of helping behavior was rush. They found that while the drive behind their religious study and the seminary student’s mindset (Good Samaritan, or unrelated story) were not good indicators of helping behavior, rushing was. While passing from one building to the other those who were told they were late were most likely to walk right by, or right over, someone helpless in the doorway. Those who were told they had plenty of time to get to the second building were most likely to stop to offer assistance, again showing external forces to hold predictive power.

These studies show that situational variables (experimenter presence, prison environment, rush, coins, and cookies) are better predictors of behavior than personality traits or other intrinsic factors. Individually these studies are troubling; together they form a body of evidence that personality theory certainly must explain if it is to be considered credible, and since virtues are robust personality traits, if personality fails then virtue seems to be without support as well.

**Situationism**

The body of empirical evidence against cross-situationally consistent traits as predictors of behavior has led some psychologists and philosophers to push for a shift away
from considering measures intrinsic to individuals and towards measures of situational characteristics. These situationists argue that since personality theory attempts to describe the behavior of individuals and there is a large body of empirical work showing situations, rather than personality traits, to have strong predictive power, traits theory must work within the limitations of situational power. And, though virtue ethics is a normative theory, presumably virtues are robust traits. If personality traits do not describe behavior then perhaps all traits should be abandoned.

Theoretical personality constructs are not behaviorally reliable. For example, someone who exhibits the characteristics of extraversion in one situation sometimes may act like an introverted person in another situation. The data clearly shows that, especially in novel situations, individuals do not exhibit behavioral consistency. John Doris, a leading situationist, claims that:

1. Population behavioral variation is due to situational differences more than dispositional differences.
2. Observed behavioral reliability seems to be the result of similar day-to-day situations
3. Personality structure is not usually evaluative consistent

(Doris, 1998, 507-509)

Ross and Nisbett, as well as Harman, attribute this difference to the fundamental attribution error (Harman, 2007; 5) (Ross & Nisbett, 1991; 125). This is the tendency to overattribute the actions of others to features of their character, rather than looking to situational factors for explanation. Ross and Nisbett believe that in any given situation, a person will construe the situation based upon a schema comprised of past experiences. In this way, individuals are actors, playing a part in a given situation. This also accounts for the fact that the most
deviation from an individual’s conceived character is in novel situations where there is little background from which to generalize.

Doris has a different explanation, claiming that character traits do exist, but only as far as individuals are generally surrounded by the same situational influences. He calls these localized character traits (Doris, 2002; 62-71). Such traits are temporally stable, and situation specific. Beyond this, Doris believes that character is fragmented.

These explanations for the common misconception of robust traits, coupled with the significant body of data indicating that actions are largely reliant on situational influences, seems to spell out a clear end to robust traits, and thereby to virtue ethics. If they are right, the best a person can hope for is to be the sort of person who is an outlier, like those who did leave the room during the Milgram experiment. But even those individuals might behave in a less than virtuous manner in another set of circumstances if character is as fragmented as Doris claims. A fair number of theorists have attempted to dispel the threat of situationism. Most have claimed that situationists misinterpret the data or over generalize the implications (Sabini and Silver 2005, Sreenivasan 2002, Appiah 2008). Here, I propose a different response to situationism. I recommend a new understanding virtue that allows the situationists experiments to stand without supporting the situationist claims regarding virtue ethics. This new theory will imply empirical sources of evidential support other than robust personality traits.

Retrospective Virtue

Ross and Nisbett liken the pressure that pushes individuals into bad choices to a ‘slippery slope.’ Situational pressures turn solid ground to mud. Devoid of such pressures a person can stand firm, making uninfluenced choices. In strong situations the pressure causes the ground to erode and the person starts slipping. Sabini and Silver have adopted this
analogy, advising that we all stay away from slippery slopes (Sabini and Silver, 2005; 562); I agree. A person can learn how to avoid these chances to slip and even to fashion cleats of a sort to walk on unexpected slopes unabashed. Learning how to identify and resist situational pressures leaves a person free to act on the robust traits that Aristotle originally envisioned. This learning process primarily involves retrospection. It is a three stage retrospective path towards virtue (See next page for diagram of the three stages).

| Situationally Unaware | Situation Avoider | Situation Master |

Stage One – The Situationally Unaware

Let’s talk about Sal. Sal is situationally unaware. Sal lives in the moment. He does not reflect on his previous experiences or actions. He makes his own choices, but they are ones heavily influenced by situational factors. Sal has no regard for what his actions say about himself, or if these actions fit with whom he wants to be. He is unreflective and thus,

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4 One potential criticism of this process is that it requires a high level of conscious vigilance. What I would like to clarify is how conscious the two later stages of virtue development need to be. Doris has already made a reasonable argument for the existence of localized character traits, a theory I have previously outlined in my discussion of situationism. I see no problem with accepting localized traits in retrospective virtue. If localized traits exist, then virtue only needs to be consciously monitored in novel situations, though it still should be reflected on. A virtuous person is skilled in reflection and awareness that situational pressures and objects need not register at a conscious level. Like Aristotle originally claimed, virtue is a matter of habituation. At the mastery level, a person can make snap judgments about what is potentially influencing in a situation and will be able to resist.

5 Achieving virtue is an arduous and vigilant process, especially in stage two, but it is achievable. However, it is possible to regress through these stages in the same way that one who eats healthy and exercises may laps into a sedentary lifestyle from time to time. Virtue needs to be maintained and honed like any craft.

6 Like Aristotle’s original conception, the path to achieving retrospective virtue begins in childhood. These three stages of virtue map nicely onto childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. It is, however, easy to slip off the path and progress in life without perusing virtue. Sal is just such an individual.
completely open to situational influences and unable to avoid negative situations. Sal could have been one of the participants who participated in the situationist experiments and he would have fit perfectly with their findings.

Sal sets off on a road trip with no plan or destination in mind and engages in many appalling acts that present themselves. He could recall that a few years ago he took a similar trip that came to an abrupt halt in a jail cell. Since Sal lives in the moment, he does not consider this similarity and once again heads off on the open road.

Stage Two – The Situation Avoider

Sal comes back from his trip broke and disheveled. He sits in his room and thinks to himself: “You know what? That was probably a bad idea. What was I thinking? The last time I went on a road trip things didn’t work out either. I should find something better to do with my vacations.” Congratulations Sal! He has just graduated from stage one to stage two.

In stage two a person reflects upon past experiences and begins to note which elicited virtuous behavior, and which elicited poor behavior. He notes that when he heads into those bars out west he inevitably ends up in a bar fight, but at the beach he tends to just have a good time relaxing near the water. By reflecting on past experience, Sal can begin to see patterns. By avoiding the wrong sorts of situations, Sal’s behavior becomes more virtuous overall. He can also notice more subtle influences that might be more or less present even in situations where his behavior is virtuous. Eventually Sal can even begin categorizing new objects and situations in reference to old ones. However, Sal is not perfectly virtuous.

He needs to take time to himself to work on reflection. Sal just needs to find a few spare moments, even sporadic moments, where the situational pressures exerted on him are minimal and he has time to think. He is not yet prepared for situational influences that are not avoidable. Sal is not impervious to situational pressures, he has simply learned to recognize and avoid situations that might lead to bad behavior. At this point, when put in a situation
like the Milgram experiment, Sal would not have the acuity of perception or the strength of resistance to situational pressures to act any differently than stage one people in such a pressured and tricky situation. Maybe Sal should not sign up for any social psychology experiment for fear they will be like the Milgram experiment, but short of that he cannot avoid such situations. This is a functional but not ideal state of virtue.

Stage Three – The Situation Master

Sal has been practicing his avoidance tactics for some time. On occasion something unexpected will happen, Sal will bump into some of his old friends, or go somewhere new only to find out it’s a lot like those bars he had been avoiding. And after a time he begins to notice that even when these opportunities for a lapse in virtue arise, he is not tempted. Sal reflects on this development and realizes that when he comes across the sorts of things that used to elicit immoral and unfavorable behaviors in him, he recognizes them as such, and that this recognition seems to counteract the pressure these things put on him.

Sal has come to reflect while still in the situation. He can mentally remove himself from the situation enough to go through the sort of reflection he has become so skillful in performing. Sal has reached a state of perfect virtue. He has become aware of the situational pressures to such a point that he can make decisions apart from their influence, even in the strongest of situations.

Testing Retrospective Virtue

Retrospective virtue could indeed be the saving grace of virtue ethics, but it will not get very far as an alternative to situationism unless it can be shown that the empirical evidence

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7 Potentially reaching this stage might be easier for some people than it is for others. The extent to which people are able to be aware of their actions is going to vary naturally, but should also be something that can be improved upon without external prompting. Alloy, Peterson, Abramson, and Seligman’s study of attribution style indicates that those with a global attribution style are more likely to be cross situationally consistent naturally (Alloy, 1984; 685).
which grounds both theories is in favor of retrospection. This is not a battle that can be won on the field of philosophy alone, but must also involve experimentation. This study was the first move towards this goal. The aim was to show that there are intrinsic characteristics of a person that have explanatory power over the person’s behavior, and that these characteristics are best explained by retrospective virtue.

Though retrospective virtue should develop naturally, it seemed as though classes in social and personality psychology offer an education in situational pressures and how these pressures can influence a person. Those who have this training should on average be somewhat farther along in developing virtue than those without this training. It also seems as though those who apply material learned in these classes to their everyday life should be farther along than those who do not apply this material, since doing so is a part of retrospection. Furthermore, it seems as though those who report themselves to have behaved virtuously in the past should behave virtuously when given an opportunity for such action. Those who can recognize a strong situation are more aware of their surroundings and actions and so should be more likely to help. But it also seems that personality traits, even agreeableness, which is thought to be most strongly correlated with helping behavior, should do little to predict such behavior.

This is in contrast to the predictions of the other competing theories. Supporters of personality traits would predict that traits, and more generally, measures of intrinsic characteristics of helping behavior and that outside pressures would be the worst predictors. They would theorize that agreeableness, a personality trait, would be the best predictor of helping behavior and that the situation strength, a situational variable, would be the worst predictor. Situationist would predict the opposite, that situation strength would be the best predictor of helping behavior and that intrinsic measures will be bad predictors because in strong situations and intrinsic traits that a person does have are constrained by the situation
and therefore are not exhibited in behavior. This study is then not only a test of retrospective virtue’s predictive power, but also the predictive power of personality theory and situationism.

Method

Participants

Forty undergraduate students from Franklin and Marshall College participated in this study. Eighteen were currently enrolled in introduction to psychology, and 22 were currently enrolled or had previously taken social or personality psychology. Participants were either told about the study during class and then provided with extra credit for their participation, or if they had completed one or both of the upper level courses they were emailed about participation and provided with five dollars compensation for their participation.

Apparatus

This study involved a confederate, and survey questions. The confederate\(^8\) was a male student at Franklin and Marshall College who dropped a sheath of papers, providing the participants with a chance to help him pick them up. The survey given involved the following components: the agreeableness section of the revised NEO-Personality Inventory (Costa &

\(^8\) The student was as ‘typical’ an F&M student as was possible to find. He was not well acquainted with any participants in the study but had taken classes in the building the study was conducted in. A male student was chosen because it was assumed that male and female students would be equally likely to help him where as male students would be more likely than female students to help a girl who dropped papers. However a majority of participants in the study were female and in their debriefing many admitted to finding him attractive, thus potentially confounding the results.
McCrae, 1992) (one question excluded from calculated results), the Brief Strengths Test
(Peterson, 2007) measuring the 24 strengths identified by the Values in Action (VIA)
classification, and two new sets of questions regarding application of learned material to
everyday life, and situation strength.

The NEO-PI section on agreeableness is a personality test of agreeableness, the trait
thought to most strongly correlate with helping behavior. An example question would be: “I
try to be courteous to everyone I meet.” There were forty-seven questions administered and
these were answered on a five-point scale (Cronbach alpha .742). The Brief Strengths Test asks
participants to report their behavior over the past month, giving a report of their virtuous
actions, not of any personality trait. An example of these questions is: “Think of your
everyday life. How often did you show KINDNESS or GENEROSITY to others when it was
possible to do so?” These questions were rated on an eleven-point scale and there were twenty-
four questions total (Cronbach alpha: .786).

The first of the two new sets asked participants to rate, on an eleven-point scale, how
much they apply the materials learned in the relevant psychology classes to their everyday life.
These were statements such as “The work I’ve done for classes applies to my everyday life.”
There were five of these questions total (Cronbach alpha: .825). The second set was based on
Cooper and Withey’s (2009) discussion of how to ask for self reports on situation strength,
asking about how clear it was what to do in the situation and how the participants thought
others would behave in the same situation (Cronbach alpha: .757). This set was also on the
eleven-point scale and involved eight questions such as: “I think everyone would interpret this
situation in the same way.”

Design

The independent variable in this study was whether or not the participants were
enrolled in introduction to psychology or if they were enrolled in or had taken social or
personality psychology. The dependent variables considered were helping behavior, the personality trait agreeableness, virtue as measured by self-report of behavior, application of material to everyday life, and situation strength. Helping was the key variable in the regression.

Procedure

Participants each met the experimenter in the atrium to sign a consent form and receive payment/credit. They were then asked to walk down the hall and wait outside the experimental room while the experimenter feigned a need to look for another participant who was running late. As the participant walked to the room, he/she passed the confederate who ‘accidentally’ dropped a sheath of papers. Participant either stopped to help, or ignored the confederate. The experimenter met the participant after “not finding” the other participant and gave the participant the questionnaire. After completion, the experimenter debriefed the participants, explaining the deception involved in the study.

Results

Of the forty students who participated thirty-three helped the confederate pick up his papers and seven did not help. This was much higher than expected based on Isen and Levin’s work. This has obvious implications about the results because if everyone already behaves the way a situationally aware person would, then becoming slightly more situationally aware through coursework will not be exemplified in helping behavior. Eighty-three percent of introduction to psychology student helped while eighty-two percent of social and personality psychology students helped, which was not a significant difference. Average scores for participants on each measure were 2.65 (on a five point scale) for agreeableness, 7.09 for
situation strength (eleven-point scale), 6.07 for application of material to everyday life (eleven-point scale), 7.56 for the brief strengths test, virtue, (eleven-point scale).

Agreeableness was not a good predictor of helping behavior by itself or as part of the composite model made up of the other possible predictors of helping behavior, even when one question was dropped due to its poor reliability. Agreeableness had a low Wald score and while other variables also had low Wald scores, agreeableness’s was particularly low and it was not particularly reliable even with one question removed so the measure was dropped from the model. The model without agreeableness was a good predictor of helping behavior, as can be seen in Tables 1-3. The Chi Squared (Table 1) was 19.705 and had a significance of .001, which is very good. It is interesting to note that the percent correctly classified (see Table 2) shows that the model better predicts helping than not helping but overall predicted well. This is most likely due to the small number who did not help. -2 Log Likelihood, Cox and Snell R Square, and Nagelkerke R Square (see Table 3) all show that the observed outcomes fit well with the predicted outcomes. That the -2 Log is close to zero (this goes up past 50) is good because this is a measure of difference between predicted and found results; it is in essence a badness of fit index. In this case the expected outcome is that all the predictors in the model are good predictors of helping behavior. The Cox and Snell R Square, and Nagelkerke R Square are both goodness of fit indexes, measuring how close the predicted and found outcomes are to one another. Both measures of goodness of fit are included because while Cox and Snell R Square’s maximum value is .75, R is a more familiar measure of goodness of fit that cannot be used with a binary logistic regression and its maximum value is 1. Nagelkerke R Square is adjusted to have a maximum value of 1, but in actuality the value of the Cox and Snell R Square is closer to what a value for R would look like for these measures.
Individually some variables in the model were better predictors than others. Alpha was set at .05, and from both their Wald and significance value (see table 4) it is clear that situation strength was the strongest predictor followed closely by the Brief Strengths Test, both of which were significant. Application of class material to everyday life and which class students were from were not significant predictors. Table 5 shows the odds ratio for each predictor, but since there was not a great deal of variation either in helping behavior or scores on these measures, the odds of going up in helping behavior if one goes up in any of the predictors is not apparent from this measure.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to find evidence showing whether retrospective virtue has evidential support above and beyond that of situationism. That situation strength proved to be a good predictor of helping behavior could be interpreted as helping both situationism and retrospective virtue. The situationists would say that if individuals thought there was a clear course of action, that others would behave the same, and that there was no conflict between getting to the experiment room as the experimenter had asked and helping this person pick up his papers, then this supports the claim that situational power is key in predicting behavior, especially when coupled with the failure of the personality trait agreeableness to predict helping behavior. For retrospective virtue, this simply shows that individuals who are keenly aware of situational pressures can choose to help. Personality theory however does not predict this outcome. If situation strength is a good predictor of helping behavior then that is removing a person’s intrinsic ability to choose a course of action based on his or her own characteristics. That most people help also causes a similar problem; it is possible that most people helped because the paper dropping situation has predictive power, and it is also possible that most people helped because situation strength, the brief strengths test, and their
overall composite scores were high. These problems only point to the need for more studies in this line of research to clarify support for these competing views.

According to the predictions of retrospective virtue, personality and social psychology students should have been more likely to help than introduction to psychology kids. That class was not significant as part of the model could suggest a number of things. It could mean that retrospective virtue does not exist, that it cannot be taught, but since it did contribute to the model there is another possibility worth considering. Because most participants helped, and because the participants were given extra credit or payment beforehand, any actual difference between the groups may have been washed over with the overwhelming push to help. It could be that the introduction to psychology students would have been less likely to help had these variables been controlled for, but this suspicion will have to wait for another study to find empirical support.

That the Brief Strengths Test was a good predictor of helping behavior indicates that something intrinsic to a person has strong predictive power. Brief Strengths asks individuals to report how often they have used or displayed certain characteristics in the past month. That individual’s perception of their behavior matched with their observed behavior undermines the situationist position. The Brief Strengths Test is not a test of personality but of behavior; it in no way helps personality trait theory that this was a good predictor of helping behavior, but it also does not hurt trait theory. For retrospective virtue the predictive power of the Brief Strengths Test is a positive finding as it shows that how individuals believe they have behaved matches up with how they have actually behaved when given opportunity to do so.

One possible confound to contend with here is that since the opportunity to help came before the administering of the Brief Strengths Test, the recent helping behavior or lack of helping behavior could have influenced each individual’s report of his or her own past behavior. Were that the case question 11 (see appendices), which most directly relates to
helping behavior, should have been the best predictor in the Brief Strengths Test of whether the individual helped or not. In actually a significant variation was found \((t = -3.728, .001 > .05)\), which speaks to the helping event having an effect on the accuracy of self-report of behavior, which is something to avoid in future studies.

The composite model consisting of the Brief Strengths Test, situation strength, application of class material to everyday life, and which class individuals were enrolled in or had taken, being a good predictor of helping behavior has negative implications for both situationism and personality theory. It has negative repercussions for situationism for the same reason that the Brief Strengths Test alone had poor implications for situationism. It is not situation strength alone that predicts helping behavior; it is situation strength and also many other factors, all intrinsic characteristics of an individual. All the factors considered together formed a cohesive predictor of helping behavior except for agreeableness. The fact that agreeableness, the only personality trait considered, was not a predictor of helping behavior, is a strong blow to personality theory. Training in retrospection through coursework in personality psychology and social psychology, applied to everyday life, coupled with an astute perception of situational strength and a reported history of virtuous action predicts helping behavior. This provides strong support for retrospective virtue.

That the results of this study support retrospective virtue over situationism and personality theory is by no means the end of this argument. There is work left to be done in providing empirical evidence to further support this finding. Further research should consider the possible confounding factors of this study. Giving extra credit and payment beforehand might have increased positive affect in participants, thus resulting in greater instances of helping behavior. In addition, the helping behavior exhibited by participants volunteering in the study may have affected their answers to the questionnaire. It might also be prudent to take the study into a different environment as the sense of family found in smaller colleges.
may encourage students to help others more frequently then they might help a complete stranger.

Additional trials and measures of helping behavior would strengthen empirical support for those individuals being the most virtuous in action. Increasing the number of questions in, and the subtleties of both the situation strength and application of class material to everyday life questions will serve to strengthen the credence of both measures. Most importantly, larger sample sizes must be used in future work. This study was conducted over the course of one semester and, so due to time and resource limitations, only forty students were sampled. To provide needed data for a binary logistic regression with this many variables, the sample should be increased to one hundred or more participants. Even with these constraints this study offers promising support for retrospective virtue, thus undermining situationism and personality psychology while saving virtue ethics.

That retrospective virtue now seems a credible competitor to situationism both on a theoretical level and also on an empirical level is good for virtue ethics. Retrospective virtue is different from traditional virtue ethics, asking individuals to reflect and avoid instead of simply practicing the virtuous acts, but the starting and ending point of both Aristotelian virtue and retrospective virtue are the same. Virtues, it has been assumed, are robust traits of some sort and so situationists have grouped virtue and personality together as being empirically nonexistent. But if virtue is developed in a retrospective way then it does exist apart from personality theory and so the situationist argument against virtue is unsupported.
References


Table 1

Chi-Square for Model Consisting of Brief Strengths Test, Application of Class Material to Everyday Life, Situation Strength, and Class (Social/Personal or Intro) as a Predictor of Helping Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chi-square</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19.705</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

Percent Correctly Classified for Model Consisting of Brief Strengths Test, Application of Class Material to Everyday Life, Situation Strength, and Class (Social/Personal or Intro) as a Predictor of Helping Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observed</th>
<th>Percent Correct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helped</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t Help</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Percentage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

Measures of Fit for the Model Consisting of Brief Strengths Test, Application of Class Material to Everyday Life, Situation Strength, and Class’s (Social/Personal or Intro) Fit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>-2 Log likelihood</th>
<th>Cox &amp; Snell R Square</th>
<th>Nagelkerke R Square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19.705</td>
<td>.389</td>
<td>.644</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4

Wald for Individual Predictors of Helping Behavior Showing Each One’s Predictive Power as Part of the Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Wald</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>df</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief Strengths Test (Virtue)</td>
<td>3.922</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of Material to Everyday Life</td>
<td>1.486</td>
<td>.223</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation Strength</td>
<td>5.964</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class (Social/Personal or Intro)</td>
<td>1.435</td>
<td>.231</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

Odds Ratio for Individual Predictors of Helping Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Exp(B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virtue</td>
<td>.120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apply</td>
<td>2.253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation</td>
<td>.110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td>.147</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### NEO-PI Revised

Please read the following statements carefully. Indicate the extent to which each statement describes yourself by circling one of the five options.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>SA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I have a good deal of faith in human nature.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. I tend to assume the best about people.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. My first reaction is to trust people.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. I’m suspicious when someone does something nice for me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. I think most of the people I deal with are honest and trustworthy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. I believe that most people will take advantage of you if you let them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. I believe the most people are basically well-intentioned.</td>
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<td>8. I tend to be cynical and skeptical of others’ intentions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. I’m not crafty or sly.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. If necessary, I am willing to manipulate people to get what I want.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. I couldn’t deceive anyone even if I wanted to.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Being perfectly honest is a bad way to do business.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>13. I would hate to be thought of as a hypocrite.</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. At times I bully or flatter people into doing what I want them to.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>16. I pride myself on my shrewdness in handling people.</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. Some people think I am selfish and egotistical.</td>
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<tr>
<td>18. I try to be courteous to everyone I meet.</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. Some people think of me as cold and calculating.</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. I generally try to be thoughtful and considerate.</td>
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<tr>
<td>21. I’m not known for my generosity.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
22. Most people I know like me.
   SD D N A SA
23. I think of myself as a charitable person.
   SD D N A SA
24. I go out of my way to help others if I can.
   SD D N A SA
25. I would rather cooperate with others than compete with them.
   SD D N A SA
26. I can be sarcastic and cutting when I need to be.
   SD D N A SA
27. I hesitate to express my anger even when it’s justified.
   SD D N A SA
28. If I don’t like people, I let them know it.
   SD D N A SA
29. When I’ve been insulted, I just try to forgive and forget.
   SD D N A SA
30. If someone starts a fight, I’m ready to fight back.
   SD D N A SA
31. I’m hard-headed and stubborn.
   SD D N A SA
32. I often get into arguments with my family and co-workers.
   SD D N A SA
33. I don’t mind bragging about my talents and accomplishments.
   SD D N A SA
34. I’d rather not talk about myself and my achievements.
   SD D N A SA
35. I’m better than most people, and I know it.
   SD D N A SA
36. I try to be humble.
   SD D N A SA
37. I feel that I am no better than others, no matter what their condition.
   SD D N A SA
38. I would rather praise others than be praised myself.
   SD D N A SA
39. I’m a superior person.
   SD D N A SA
40. Political leaders need to be more aware of the human side of their policies.
   SD D N A SA
41. I’m hard-headed and tough-minded in my attitudes.
   SD D N A SA
42. We can never do too much for the poor and elderly.
   SD D N A SA
43. I have no sympathy for panhandlers.
   SD D N A SA
44. Human need should always take priority over economic considerations.
   SD D N A SA
45. I believe all human beings are worthy of respect.
   SD D N A SA
46. I have sympathy for others less fortunate than me.
47. I would rather be known as “merciful” than “just.”
Brief Strengths Test
Think about how you have acted in the actual situations described below during the past month (four weeks). Please answer only in terms of what YOU actually did.

Please read each statement carefully. Write a number between 0 and 10 next to each statement according to how often you acted in the way described.

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7-----8-----9-----10
Never                                                                 Always

1. Think of actual situations in which you had the opportunity to do something that was novel or innovative. How often did you use CREATIVITY or INGENUITY in these situations?

2. Think of actual situations in which you had the opportunity to explore something new or to do something different. How often did you show CURIOSITY or INTEREST in these situations?

3. Think of actual situations in which you had a complex and important decision to make. How often did you use CRITICAL THINKING, OPEN-MINDEDNESS, or GOOD JUDGMENT in these situations?

4. Think of actual situations in which you had the opportunity to learn more about some topic. How often did you show LOVE OF LEARNING in these situations?

5. Think of actual situations in which you had the opportunity to offer advice to another person who needed it. How often did you use PERSPECTIVE or WISDOM in these situations?

6. Think of actual situations in which you experienced fear, threat, embarrassment, or discomfort. How often did you use BRAVERY or COURAGE in these situations?

7. Think of actual situations in which you faced a difficult and time-consuming task. How often did you use PERSEVERANCE, PERSISTENCE, or INDUSTRIOUSNESS in these situations?

8. Think of actual situations in which it was possible for you to lie, cheat or mislead. How often did you show HONESTY or AUTHENTICITY in these situations?

9. Think of your everyday life. How often did you feel and show ZEST or ENTHUSIASM when it was possible to do so?

10. Think of your everyday life. How often did you express your LOVE or ATTACHMENT to others (friends, family members) and accept LOVE from others when it was possible to do so?

11. Think of your everyday life. How often did you show KINDNESS or GENEROSITY to others when it was possible to do so?

12. Think of actual situations in which you needed to understand what other people need or want, and how to respond to them accordingly. How often did you use SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE or SOCIAL SKILLS in these situations?
13. Think of actual situations in which you were a member of a group that needed your help and loyalty. How often did you show TEAMWORK in these situations?

14. Think of actual situations in which you had some power or influence over two or more other people. How often did you use FAIRNESS in these situations?

15. Think of actual situations in which you were a member of a group that needed direction. How often did you use LEADERSHIP in these situations?

16. Think of actual situations in which someone hurt you. How often did you show FORGIVENESS or MERCY in these situations?

17. Think of your everyday life. How often did you show MODESTY or HUMILITY when it was possible to do so?

18. Think of actual situations in which you were tempted to do something that you might later regret. How often did you use PRUDENCE, DISCRETION, or CAUTION in these situations?

19. Think of actual situations in which you experienced desires, impulses, or emotions that you wished to control. How often did you use SELF-CONTROL or SELF-REGULATION in these situations?

20. Think of your everyday life. How often did you feel or show APPRECIATION OF BEAUTY AND EXCELLENCE or AWE when it was possible to do so?

21. Think of actual situations in which someone else helped or benefited you. How often did you feel and express GRATITUDE and THANKFULNESS?

22. Think of actual situations in which you experienced failure or a setback. How often did you show HOPE or OPTIMISM in these situations?

23. Think of your everyday life. How often did you use PLAYFULNESS or HUMOR when it was possible to do so?

24. Think of your everyday life. How often did you experience RELIGIOUSNESS, SPIRITUALITY, or SENSE OF MEANING AND PURPOSE when it was possible to do so?
Application of Class Material to Everyday Life
Given to Introduction to Psychology Students
Please answer the following questions as they relate to your experiences in the classroom.
Please read each statement carefully. Write a number between 0 and 10 next to each statement
according to how often you acted in the way described.

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7-----8-----9-----10
Never Always

1. The work I’ve done for classes applies to my everyday life.
2. The material I’ve learned in psychology classes relates to my everyday life.
3. I try to apply the material from psychology classes to my everyday life.
4. I feel that psychology material relates to my everyday life.
5. I believe taking psychology has had a positive effect on my behavior.

Given to Social or Personality Psychology Students
Please answer the following questions as they relate to your experiences in the classroom.
Please read each statement carefully. Write a number between 0 and 10 next to each statement
according to how often you acted in the way described.

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7-----8-----9-----10
Never Always

1. The work I’ve done for classes applies to my everyday life.
2. The material I’ve learned in psychology classes relates to my everyday life.
3. I try to apply the material from psychology classes to my everyday life.
4. I feel that personality and social psychology material relates to my everyday life.
5. I believe taking personality or social psychology has had a positive effect on my behavior.
Situation Strength
On your way to this room you passed an individual carrying a sheath of papers. Please answer the following questions as they relate to your experiences when this individual dropped his papers. Please read each statement carefully. Write a number between 0 and 10 next to each statement according to how often you acted in the way described.

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7-----8-----9-----10
Never Always

1. I think everyone would interpret this situation in the same way.
2. I think everyone would agree on how to act in this situation.
3. I expect to be adequately rewarded or not punished for doing the right thing in this situation.
4. I think everyone has the ability to do the right thing in this situation.
5. I did not think that the passerby would need/want help picking up his papers.
6. I think others would agree with my assessment.
7. I think others would do the same thing I did.
8. I felt conflict between what the experimenter had asked me to do and my own desire to help him.