

Ordinary Virtue

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Ethics should not be merely an analysis of ordinary mediocre conduct, it should be a hypothesis about good conduct and about how this can be achieved. How can we make ourselves better? Is a question moral philosophers should attempt to answer.¹

Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts"

1. Morality is a set of ordinary skills, involving feeling the right emotions, doing the right actions, perceiving the moral world accurately, making sound moral judgments. Because morality involves this set of skills, it takes practice to get them just right. In this way, morality is very much akin to other everyday skills: reading a book, driving a car, riding a bicycle, playing tennis. To be sure, the skills involved in morality may be more complex and far-reaching than those involved in reading a book or playing tennis. But in all these domains, we acquire the expertise involved in these skills through old-fashioned practice.

¹ Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," *The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts*, London, Routledge, 1971, p. 76.

It can be tempting to see morality, not as a set of skills, but as a series of dilemmas. On this understanding, morality involves exciting problems, hard cases, tragic choices – trolley problems, torture to extract life saving information, questions of just war, the morality of abortion, euthanasia, and the death penalty. Certainly all of these hard cases are morally important: I do not mean to suggest that these are not properly thought of as moral problems. They are. And it is important to figure out what to say about them. I suspect, however, that there is a cost to thinking of these sorts of matters as *paradigmatic* of the moral domain. When we see these exciting cases as the paradigm of moral questions, we overlook the ordinary, everyday nature of morality and the important questions of how to cultivate the moral emotions, how to nurture the ability to perceive moral situations accurately, how to foster good moral judgment, how to ensure that we act correctly both in the ordinary case and in the rare case of a tragic moral dilemma.

The view of morality as a skill is right at home with the virtue theorist's moral outlook. Indeed, many virtue theorists, following Aristotle and to some extent Plato, see morality precisely in this way. As such, the skill-based moral theorist and the virtue theorist both emphasize that cultivating moral skills involves cultivating character traits. And the process of moral development, on this view, involves cultivating emotions, patterns of seeing, habits of responding, in short, developing traits of character.

But an impressive and growing body of psychological data casts doubt on the very idea of traits of character. Numerous psychological studies have examined human moral behavior. Consider just a tiny fraction of their findings: Stanley Milgram's now-famous experiment on obedience finds that two-thirds of subjects fully obey an experimenter's requests to administer

debilitating and potentially lethal electric shocks to an unwilling victim;² Isen and Levin find that finding a dime in a pay phone coin return appears to be the determinant of whether someone helps a person in need;³ Darley and Batson find that being in a hurry, in some cases, determines whether someone helps another person in need;⁴ and finally, the presence of other people who either help or do not help is a significant determinant of whether a naïve subject helps someone in need.⁵

On the basis of these studies and many others, some conclude that it is the situation and its unique set of psychological pressures that determine the individual's action. This view, often called situationism, offers a way to make sense of how ordinary individuals can commit horrific acts of cruelty: these individuals are not cruel people. Rather, they are ordinary individuals who are overcome by their situations.

On the basis of this data, some philosophers have concluded that there are no enduring character traits that determine an individual's actions. John Doris, one of situationism's most notable proponents, has argued that character traits are local: individuals are compassionate only when they find a dime, helpful when not in a hurry or when others around them help.⁶ This view appears to undercut our ordinary conception of the individual as the generator of actions, as responsible for those actions and as subject to praise and blame. But it is not moral responsibility in general that is the target of the situationist philosopher. Rather, the

² Stanley Milgram, "A Behavioral Study of Obedience," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67: 371-378.

³ Isen, A.M., and Levin, P.F., "Effect of Feeling Good on Helping: Cookies and Kindness," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 21: 1972, 384-388.

⁴ Darley, J.M. and Batson, C.D., "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 27: 100-108, 1973.

⁵ Latane, B., and Rodin, J., "A Lady in Distress: Inhibiting Effects of Friends and Strangers on Bystander Intervention," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 5: 189-202, 1969; and Latane, B., and Darley, J.M., *The Unresponsive Bystander: Why Doesn't He Help?* New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970.

⁶ John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

situationist argues that moral theories emphasizing character are most vulnerable to this line of attack. Thus, Doris argues that virtue theory ought to be rejected because it relies on an empirically unsupported view of character. These studies together appear to show that there are no enduring character traits, that is, no character traits of the sort the virtue theorist requires.

I argue, however, that this conclusion is mistaken. The virtue theorist has a ready answer to the situationist's objection. Moreover, the response to the situationist will help elucidate the ordinary, everyday process of moral development, including questions about the role of rules in moral justification and moral development, the latter being a process that has been historically underemphasized in philosophy. This under-emphasis on moral development has been encouraged by our proclivity to see morality as constituted by moral dilemmas, requiring responses that anyone can instantly access, rather than constituted by everyday problems and skills that must be cultivated over time.

A related problem for the virtue theorist arises when we consider a different situationist problem: the impressive cross-cultural variety of conceptions of the good life and of the related virtues or excellences.⁷ A quick glance at any two cultures separated by time or geography will reveal very different virtues and pictures of the human good. If the good is used to derive precisely what the virtues are, and if different cultures have different conceptions of the good, then the virtue theorist risks a naïve and culturally biased view in defending any one conception of the good. If this objection holds, it is not merely the virtue theorists' view of character that is

⁷ Jesse Prinz, "The Normativity Challenge: Cultural Psychology Provides the Real Threat to Virtue Ethics," *Journal of Ethics*, (2009) 13: 117-144.

empirically unsupported, but the very normative grounding of virtue theory, the answer to the question, why are the virtues good?

But we will see that cultural variety need not lead us to a relativistic conclusion. To be sure, some cultural conceptions of the good and some corresponding “virtues” will turn out not to be good for human beings. But even more important, we will see that Aristotle’s view of the human function is sufficiently general that it can allow that different cultures might implement or develop human flourishing (and the related virtues) in somewhat different ways. Granting this needn’t lead us to a relativistic conclusion; rather we can hold, as Aristotle does, that the human good is partly constituted by the good of the social context that we occupy. In other words, it is compatible with an Aristotelian view that there might be several different instantiations of the good and related virtues.

So it will turn out, in the end, that the situationist makes an important point, namely, that the situations in which we find ourselves have a substantial bearing on our ability to be morally good and on our ability to flourish (in short, on our ability to live excellently). This insight is one we ought to accept. But doing so does not undermine the argument of the virtue theorist because, in short, human beings are well able to be sensitive to the situations in which they find themselves. Situational sensitivity is one of the moral skills we can, and must, cultivate in our process of moral development. Because the virtue theorist can tell a compelling story of moral development, the virtue theorist is uniquely well placed to answer both the situationist challenge and the normativity challenge.

2. Situationists have mounted an impressive challenge for virtue theory. They have argued that empirical psychology conclusively demonstrates that there are no robust traits, no

traits in the virtue theorist's sense. A robust character trait is one possessed by an individual across a range of trait-relevant situations, is consistently revealed through the individual's actions, and is positively correlated with the possession of other, similar, traits. So courage is a robust trait if individuals act courageously across a whole range of situations pertaining to courage (in battle, in public speaking, in conveying difficult news, etc), if individuals consistently act in a courageous way in similar sorts of situations (different situations of battle), and if the possession of courage makes it more likely that individuals will possess other positive traits (honesty, for instance). Situationists have argued that because the influences on action are so random and remote from the moral considerations themselves (finding a dime in a pay-phone coin return to name just one), that there can be no traits in the sense given above. Our actions are determined more by the situations in which we find ourselves (does a dime happen to be in the coin return – if so, then we may help a person in need), than they are by our stable character traits.

Virtue theorists have offered a vigorous response to the situationist critique. In response to the critique by Doris and others,⁸⁸ virtue theorists have argued that Doris' critique employs a non-Aristotelian conception of character and moreover that the individuals in the studies touted by the situationists do not act virtuously because they are not virtuous. The truly virtuous person, according to this response, would be able to think through the many factors, including the pressure to be obedient, the mood elevating effect of finding a dime, the

⁸⁸ See especially, Gil Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 99: 315-331, 1999.

blinding effect of being in a hurry, and so on, to arrive at the right thing to do.⁹ Virtue, we are reminded, is hard; so we should not be surprised that ordinary people fail to achieve it. Their failure does not impugn the ideal.

But, we might ask, how does the virtuous person do it? By what psychological mechanism does she arrive at the correct understanding of what is required in each situation? The virtue theorist cannot simply stipulate that the virtuous person does this. Indeed, part of the situationist's critique is that it is *surprising* factors, seemingly morally irrelevant factors—such as finding a dime—that support or undermine virtuous action.¹⁰ So, the situationist might urge, everyone, even the rare virtuous person, will sometimes be blind-sided by a seemingly morally irrelevant factor that turns out to be relevant. Because of this, it seems impossible for anyone to get things perfectly morally right. Human psychology is too complex; the influences on our moral choices are too varied, too random, for anyone, even a morally skillful one, to always get things right.

To reply to this concern, we will need to dig deeper into the skills involved in morally virtuous response and the process of moral development that would cultivate these skills. Moral expertise involves at least¹¹ the following four skills: having accurate moral perception, feeling correct moral emotions, having good moral judgment, and doing morally correct actions. The virtue theorist contends that these four skills are necessary to perfect character

⁹ Julia Annas, "Virtue Ethics and Social Psychology," *A Priori*, 2: 20-33, 2003; Rachana Kamtekar, "Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of our Character," *Ethics* 114 (April 2004): 458-491; Maria Merritt, "Virtue Ethics and Situationist Personality Psychology," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 3: 365-383, 2000; and Maria Merritt, "Aristotelian Virtue and the Interpersonal Aspect of Ethical Character," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 6 (1) 23-49, 2009.

¹⁰ Doris, *Ibid.*

¹¹ It may involve others as well; my claim is that these four skills are necessary for moral expertise, though perhaps not sufficient.

and response to moral situations. Yet, each of these four skills is enormously complex. To demonstrate this, consider the following individual, named, “Hasty Email Responder.” Someone sends “hasty email responder” an email that she finds to be abrupt and rude. The email elicits in her feelings of anger. She perceives that the author of the email has been indifferent to her feelings on some important and sensitive matter. Naturally, she desires to respond promptly to the email to let the author know that this email has been an affront to her dignity and that the author was wrong to disregard her feelings. And so she does this. After composing her reply, she fleetingly considers whether it is best, in the end, to send the reply. Indeed, she has a (defeasible) moral rule that says, “Never send an email when angry.” She considers this rule, but hastily judges that it does not apply to this case and sends the email.

The reader will notice, in considering this rather mundane moral matter, a number of potential moral failings in hasty email responder: perhaps hasty email responder ought not to have seen the initial email as an affront; perhaps she ought not to have felt angry. Perhaps she ought not to have judged that her moral rule did not apply to this case. And finally, perhaps she ought not to have sent the email reply. To determine whether hasty email responder perceived the situation correctly, felt the right emotions, made the correct judgments, and did the right action, we would need to fill in a lot more details of the case. But notice, for the moment, the substantial complexity of this simple, everyday matter of replying to an email. We face many moral situations such as this everyday, but the skills involved in responding to these situations gracefully and morally-well are nuanced and complex and involve practical wisdom: the wisdom of how to perceive, feel, judge, and act in everyday situations.

Some virtue theorists make precisely this point in responding to the situationist. These theorists emphasize that the virtuous person cultivates practical wisdom so that, across all situations, she will know how best to respond. Practical wisdom, on one interpretation of Aristotle, is a sort of know-how: knowledge of how to perceive, feel, judge, and act all in accordance with virtue. So virtue theorists argue that the individuals in the many situationist psychological studies who fail to act correctly, or again hasty email responder above, all lack the practical wisdom characteristic of moral virtue.

But even if it is true that these individuals lack practical wisdom (and it seems likely that they do), explaining their moral failures by appeal to practical wisdom still leaves it unclear how the moral novice can develop so as to become like the virtuous person.¹² Moral theorists want not only an account that explains how the morally perfect person gets things right (she has practical wisdom), but also want to know how the ordinary person can become more virtuous.

One response to this problem is to exhort the moral novice to be like the virtuous person: the novice should cultivate the four skills involved in practical wisdom (perception, emotions, judgment, and action), looking to the virtuous person as a guide. This idea is encouraged by a passage in Aristotle. In his definition of virtue, and his explanation of the doctrine of the mean, Aristotle holds that “virtue is a state of character....determined....by that principle by which the person of practical wisdom would determine it.”¹³ According to this passage, it can seem that the moral novice should not only consult with the moral experts she knows but that in addition she should hold the person of practical wisdom as a standard against which to measure her actions. So according to some virtue theorists, “the criterion of right

¹² Merritt, 2009.

¹³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1925, 1006^b36.

action [lies] in some conception of what an idealized yet fully human agent would do.”¹⁴ What makes an action right, on this view, is ‘that the virtuous person would do it.’

But it will be very difficult for the moral novice to operationalize her understanding of the virtuous person: the moral novice, by virtue of being a novice, has only a rudimentary and distant understanding of the moral skill of the virtuous person. To know abstractly how the virtuous person sees the situation, how she feels, what she judges about it, and what she does, will not take the novice very far toward seeing the situation as the virtuous person does, feeling the appropriate emotions, making the right judgments, and doing the right actions. Even in precisely similar situations, the thinking of the novice and the virtuous person are so dissimilar that no reflection on the virtuous person can help the novice to improve.¹⁵ Moreover, the virtuous person as standard-bearer is so far removed from the moral considerations in the situation that it will be extremely difficult for the moral novice to reason from the virtuous-person-as-moral-standard, to the features of the moral situation, to, finally, a conclusion about what to do. Because most moral novices have no idea what a virtuous person is like, thinking abstractly about the virtuous person and what she might do will offer little guidance to the moral novice.

One response to this problem offered by some virtue theorists¹⁶ is to provide aspiring moral agents with systematic decision-making guidance in the form of internalized moral rules, much like the rule held by hasty email responder, “Never send an email when angry.” These moral rules represent what is morally significant, alerting moral agents to the salient features of

¹⁴ Merritt, 2009, p. 47.

¹⁵¹⁵ Simon Keller, “Virtue Ethics is Self-Effacing,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 85, No. 2, pp. 221-231; June 2007.

¹⁶ Merritt, 2009.

situations. Some philosophers have referred to such rules as rules of moral salience.¹⁷ Some rules of moral salience might include: “Suffering and pain ought to be avoided,” “lying requires a moral justification,” and so on. Some Kantians argue that this set of moral rules enables agents to know when to deploy the categorical imperative and what information to include in a maxim.¹⁸ The virtue theorist, by analogy, could argue that these rules of moral salience enable the novice to see which actions to do in order to cultivate the know-how that otherwise seems to remain elusive to the moral learner.

The possibility of rules of moral salience raises two issues, and we need to take them in turn. First, there is the metaphysical question of whether moral rules constitute the right- and wrong-making features of moral situations. Related to this, there is the matter of whether the virtuous person herself constitutes the right- and wrong-making features of situations. I argue that neither moral rules nor the virtuous person constitute the right- and wrong-making features of moral situations. Second, there is the epistemological question of whether moral rules are useful heuristics for non-experts. And here I argue that moral rules can be useful to the moral learner, though they are typically much less useful than we tend to think.¹⁹

It can seem attractive to see rules as constituting the right- and wrong-making features of moral situations. On this view, moral expertise does not require hard-to-come-by moral judgment, but instead, once the moral agent has perceived what is at issue, she simply applies her rule and thus knows what to do. This view has the obvious attraction that the tricky business of applying correct judgment about what to do is eliminated.

¹⁷ Barbara Herman, “The Practice of Moral Judgment,” *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993, pp.73-93.

¹⁸ Herman, *ibid.*

¹⁹ There is a lively literature that explores these two related questions. For a good survey of relevant papers see *Moral Particularism*, Margaret Little and Brad Hooker (eds), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000.

However, despite the ease in applying such a rule to arrive at a right action, it remains the case that rules do not constitute the right and wrong-making features of moral situations. The rule, “Lying is morally wrong,” is not what makes lying wrong. Rather, lying is wrong because it uses or deceives the recipient of the lie.

It is for the same reason, I suggest, that the virtuous person herself does not constitute the criterion of rightness and wrongness. While it might be helpful to look to the virtuous person for advice about how to respond morally, or even to consider the virtuous person as a model to follow, nonetheless the virtuous person, herself, is not the determinant of rightness and wrongness. Instead, Aristotle tells us that the right- and wrong-making features of situations are the *orthos logos* or the right reasons

Aristotle holds that “virtue is a state of character, concerned with choice, lying in a mean, determined by *orthos logos*”²⁰ that is, determined by the right reasons “and by those reasons by which the person of practical wisdom would determine it”²¹. The final part of the definition of virtue is not a criterion of rightness, but rather the suggestion that the virtuous person can serve as a guide or model to the moral novice (though as we saw above, there are genuine limits to the utility of thinking of the virtuous person as a model or guide for the moral novice), but the true criterion of rightness and wrongness are the *orthos logos*, or the right reasons.²² Now of course, the feelings, actions, perception, and judgment of the virtuous person will always be co-extensive with what the *orthos logos* require. But we ought not to think of the person of practical wisdom as determining what to do and how to feel.

²⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106^b36.

²¹ Aristotle, *Ibid.*

²² Corrine Gartner has made this point in comments to me on this paper, Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, San Diego, CA, April 2014.

But now how do we determine what the *orthos logos* are? In his explanation of the doctrine of the mean, Aristotle argues that:

Moral virtue... is concerned with passions and actions and in this there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is both intermediate and best and this is characteristic of virtue.²³

Virtue requires that we feel emotions and perform actions in the right amount, at the right times, with reference to the right objects, toward the right people, with the right motive and in the right way. And if we feel the emotions correctly in all these ways then we have hit the mean. What makes a certain path the correct one is not that the path of feeling and action lies in some absolute mean between the excesses and deficiencies, nor that it is the path the virtuous person would follow, nor that it accords with a moral rule. Rather what makes a certain path the correct one is that it is the path that corresponds to the proper answer to each of Aristotle's questions. A path of emotion is correct when the individual feels the right emotions, in the right amounts, at the right times, with reference to the right objects, toward the right people and in the right way. Her action is correct in the same way. The right making features of the moral situation, then, are neither the rules of moral salience, nor the virtuous person herself; rather the right making features are the details of the situation, the particulars that correspond to each of these injunctions. To find the mean in each situation is to find what is called for regarding each of these *logoi*.

²³ Aristotle, p. 1106^b19.

Now rules, of course, may attempt to specify in an incomplete way what the morally significant features of situations may be. They may attempt to bridge the gap between moral perception and correct emotion and action. But the rules themselves do not represent the criteria of virtue. The same is true of the virtuous person: she may attempt to articulate what one ought to feel or do in some situation or other; she may give advice, exhort us to act or feel in some way; but this advice, these exhortations do not constitute the reasons why those things are constitutive of virtue. The reasons are the *orthos logos*.

So for example, consider whether someone should stop and help a person in need. Whether this action is virtuous will depend on the details of the situation: to what destination is she headed: to perform surgery? To pick up her sick child at school? To eat lunch with a friend? And again, it will depend on how grave is the need for help, and on whether there is another person at hand who is ready and able to provide the help. What the potential-helper ought to do will depend on all these details and will depend again on her psychology. If she tends to offer help too often, and the need is not grave, perhaps she ought to hold back, to avoid burnout or promote some other good. In doing so, she cultivates the virtue of helpfulness.

But suppose, as was the case for some of the subjects in the studies we have considered, the individual is in a hurry or in a bad mood (or a non-elevated mood, because she did not find a dime) and so she does not even notice that there is a person here in need of help? Or suppose the person notices vaguely that someone is in need but is not moved by this need. Aristotle reminds us that, moral matters “depend on particular facts and the decision

rests with perception.”²⁴ We cannot act virtuously unless we first perceive the moral features that merit a response. No set of rules of moral salience, no amount of systematic decision-making guidance can compensate for poor moral perception or faulty moral judgment. We cannot employ the decision-making guidance until we have seen what is called for. And even after we perceive a moral situation accurately, it still takes good judgment to move from the perception of what is required to the correct action. Even the presence of rules of moral salience or the presence of a metric for making decisions does not obviate the need for excellent judgment and perception. And the same is true of reflection on the person of practical wisdom: no amount of such reflection can determine for us those features of situations to which we ought to be attuned. But once we have cultivated excellent, fully accurate moral vision and correct moral judgment, the need for systematic decision-making guidance, or reflection on the virtuous person, drops away: we will simply see which features of the situation call for a response and which do not.²⁵

So the virtuous person does not need rules or expert advice to perceive situations aright, to judge correctly, to have the right feelings, and to do the right actions. But how do moral novices get to be virtuous: how does one get to be the sort of person who has this perfect perception, judgment, emotion and action? Here again it can be tempting to think that there may be some value in rules. Consider again hasty email responder. In the situation described, she should have followed the advice of her moral rule, “Never send an email when angry.” Had she done so, she would have acted correctly in the situation described. This is true

²⁴ Aristotle, 1109^b21.

²⁵ Others have made a similar point. See, for instance, Margaret Little, “Seeing and Caring: The Role of Affect in Feminist Moral Epistemology,” *Hypatia*, 10(3) 117-137, 1995.

even though *always* following this rule (unthinkingly, we might say) might sometimes (in other cases) lead her to perform a wrong action. The virtuous person would of course never do a wrong action, and would know when to follow the rule and when to abandon it.

But even though following the rule in this case would prevent hasty email responder from doing a wrong action, nonetheless, following the rule itself will not help hasty email responder to cultivate her accurate moral perception and correct moral judgment. Indeed, it might even be the case that reliance on rules will discourage moral agents from progressing in their moral development. The rote adherence to rules will prevent wrong-doing in some cases, but it will also lead individuals to sometimes perform wrong actions, because in *those* situations the correct thing to do would be to recognize that the rule does not apply or gives incorrect advice. Only the agent with accurate moral perception and correct moral judgment will see this and thus be able to respond correctly. Rules, then, can be helpful heuristics, as they attempt to call our attention to the salient features of moral situations. But reliance on rules can also be detrimental, leading us to atrophy in our skills of moral perception and judgment.

But how do we cultivate this accurate moral perception and correct moral judgment if not through the use of rules? The only way is through practice: through attempting to do the right thing, attempting to perceive and judge correctly, attempting to feel emotions properly and act correctly. Moral novices also learn through sometimes making mistakes, then reflecting on those mistakes and learning from them. When hasty email responder impulsively sends the angry email, and sees the bad effects this action has, she sees a reason to avoid doing this in the future. Perhaps she also learns more information that changes her emotions, so she does not feel angry in the presence of a terse email; but instead learns to see terse emails as hurried

or hurried bits of communication, but not as affronts to her dignity. In short, by reflecting on her actions and omissions, hasty email responder learns more about what feelings and actions are appropriate in similar cases down the road.

So rather than look to rules as a substitute for practical wisdom, some virtue theorists have argued that virtue theory requires an account of moral commitment.²⁶ Moral commitments represent the idea that even though there is no way to codify, in advance, the sort of salience any particular feature of a situation might have (there is no way to know in a context-free way how to interpret a terse email, for instance, or know if telling a falsehood is a lie), there are, as Aristotle suggests, some patterns that hold for the most part,²⁷ and are thus, discernible. On this view, a process of moral development enables a novice to know that some things like pleasure and pain, suffering and death are typically morally significant. But whether they are significant and the way in which they are significant often varies from context to context. Sometimes the fact that an action would cause suffering makes it to be avoided; but other times it does not. More generally, the fact that some action causes suffering will typically be significant; but it need not always be significant nor need it always lead towards or away from action apart from a specific context.

The virtue theorist need not, then, make recourse to rules, understood as exceptionless principles that always lead towards or away from action. She can instead embrace the idea of moral commitments: the idea that certain features of the moral landscape are typically morally

²⁶ David Bakhurst, "Ethical Particularism in Context," in *Moral Particularism*, Margaret Little and Brad Hooker (eds), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp.157-177.

²⁷ Aristotle, *Ibid*, 1103^b38-49: "...this must be agreed beforehand, that the whole account of matters of conduct must be given in outline and not precisely... The general account being of this nature, the account of particular cases is yet more lacking in exactness; for they do not fall under any art or precept, but the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion..."

significant, though they are not always significant, nor are they always significant in the same way, nor do they always require the same sort of emotion or action. Consider a simple example: I find my 10-year-old child upset and crying with a minor cut on his leg. Before I can know how to feel or what to do in response to my crying child, I need more information. If my child is injured, sympathy may be appropriate (unless of course my child has put himself repeatedly in a situation where this sort of injury is likely or has occurred before, in which case he ought to have known better than to do the injury-promoting action), as may be helping actions, like applying Band-Aids and antibiotic ointment. If I learn that my child is the instigator of a conflict then again sympathy may not be appropriate, or might be joined by a frustration that he has acted inappropriately. So my precise emotions and my actions may be altered depending on the details of the situation we are experiencing.

The virtue theorist then should embrace the idea of moral commitments, which offer an account of features of the moral landscape that are typically significant, knowing that situations may (and probably will) arise in which these features are not significant at all or are significant in some novel way. Consider finding a dime in a pay phone coin return. Typically finding a dime in a coin return has no moral significance, but sometimes, it turns out, it is significant. Should one encounter a person in need shortly after finding a dime, this feature will be significant. But how on earth could any moral agent come to be sensitive to something as seemingly irrelevant as finding a dime? Perhaps so described, it will be very hard to be sensitive to this fact as morally relevant. But as a larger issue of attention to one's mood, it is easier to see how this might be recognized to be morally significant. Moral learners cannot easily be aware of all of the myriad influences on their moods (dimes in coin-returns, good-smelling bakeries nearby,

etc.) but moral agents can be aware of their moods more generally and the way in which they make helping or not helping more likely. The same might be said for implicit associations – subconscious associations that nonetheless powerfully influence action. It may be impossible to be aware of subconscious associations (since they are below our conscious awareness); but it may be possible to bring their influence to the conscious level so that we may begin to notice and thus to shift the way they affect us.

But how do we cultivate this excellent perception of the myriad features of our situations that might possibly be morally significant? Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts. The only way to cultivate excellent moral perception is to learn, one by one, to be sensitive to features of situations that sometimes make a moral difference. Sometimes being in a hurry means that we have no moral obligation to help; and sometimes it means just the opposite. Learning to discern the difference is precisely what is involved in the skill of morality. Sometimes being alone means that we are obligated to provide help, and sometimes it means that we are not obligated to provide the help. There is no way to tell which it is until we find ourselves in a moral situation. Prior to being in a situation, the novice can learn about diffusion of responsibility and other moral particulars. She can have a set of moral commitments (e.g. pain is often morally significant, bleeding is often morally significant, possessions are often morally significant), however she will not be able to know what precise affect on emotion or action any particular will have until she faces a concrete moral situation and has cultivated adequate moral perception and judgment to know how to read situations and move from that perception to emotion and action.

3. At this point in the particularist's argument, many remain baffled at the prospect of learning about morality one particular at a time. How can humans learn about all the details of human psychology, one by one, with no exceptionless rules, no hard and fast patterns to be discerned at the non-moral level?

Despite the fact that this process looks overwhelming in its complexity, nevertheless, human beings do just this. We do it not only with morality, but in many contexts. Consider, for example, learning to read. The young school child well into the process learns to recognize letters, learns that letters have distinctive sounds and learns to associate each letter with its characteristic sounds. When the child first grapples with printed words, she recognizes that letters constitute words: 'c', 'a', 't' make up 'cat'. She learns to sound out these letters until she associates these letters, in this arrangement, with the word 'cat'. After many instances of encountering this string of letters, she learns that 'c', 'a', 't' represent the word 'cat'. Subsequently she just sees 'cat'. She goes on to do this for the thousands of words in her language. No doubt she will become more proficient at this over time and do it more quickly. Learning to read is an enormously complex task. Yet, human beings discern each word, one by one, and remember it. And we do this for each word in the language, learning one by one to associate the string of letters in that word with the word and the object itself.

Moreover, there are no exceptionless rules to help us with this task of enormous complexity. Consider just one particular with which the beginning reader must grapple. Typically 'g' at the beginning of a word is pronounced. So the beginning reader will learn that 'g' in 'girl,' 'great' and 'goose' is pronounced. But then he sees the word 'gnome' and initially cannot recognize this word because he tries to pronounce the 'g' at the beginning. But then he

learns that *this* 'g' is silent. When he then encounters the word 'gnu' he might again think that this 'g' is silent. In one pronunciation of the word (referring to the elk-like animal) the 'g' is not pronounced; but in another pronunciation of the word (referring to a computer operating system) it is. There is no exceptionless rule that will help the reader to know what to do with a 'g' at the beginning of a word. Fortunately, the human brain is so complex that he does not need a rule: he simply learns the words one by one, and does this for every word in his language.

This is not unlike how we learn the moral significances of countless moral particulars. Practical wisdom just is the virtuous person's skillful response to the myriad, yet ordinary, moral particulars we encounter every day and to which we cultivate a sensitivity.

How can the novice cultivate this sensitivity? There are no shortcuts. We learn about morality situation by situation, and much of this learning is implicit in the sense that we notice, watch, and observe moral significances from a very young age. One by one we learn to be sensitive to all the nuances and complexities of morality. That is the path and the only path to virtue, or to the know-how we need to respond appropriately to moral situations, one at a time.

4. We are now in a position to reply to the situationist's critique. The situationist argues that it is not characters, but situations, that determine an individual's actions. On this view, virtue theory is in an especially weak position, because virtue theory relies on a notion of character that is not empirically supported. But the virtue theorist, because she emphasizes character and moral development, has paradoxically, a powerful way to resist the situationist's critique. The virtue theorist holds that individuals can cultivate their characters to be

responsive to all of the data that empirical psychology has discovered or will discover about human agency. So when psychologists learn about the affects of finding a dime or diffusion of responsibility on helping behavior, the moral novice can learn to be sensitive to these psychological facts. In short, as psychologists reveal morally significant facts, one by one, moral novices learn about them and learn to be sensitive to them. Virtue theory, precisely because it emphasizes character and moral development has a ready way to accommodate the findings of empirical psychology: individuals can develop their characters so as to become responsive to the relevant moral facts.

An additional worry that one might have at this point is that this view makes virtue extremely difficult to acquire.²⁸ Could it really be this hard to be perfectly virtuous? The answer is that it is very hard to be perfectly virtuous: to know each and every possible moral particular and whether it is significant, to what extent and in what way; to accurately perceive every moral situation, to feel the correct emotions and do the right actions each and every time, is a tall order. At the same time, it is, like learning to read, a task that is extremely ordinary. Moral expertise is all about correct perception, judgment, emotion and action concerning mostly mundane matters: skinned knees, terse emails, knowing which jokes would be funny and which would be offensive, and so on. Most of these things we learn in the ordinary course of moral development; some require more thoughtful reflection. But all are necessary to full virtue.

²⁸ Corrine Gartner raised this objection in her commentary on my paper at the Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, San Diego, CA, April 2014.

5. There is, however, one final problem in the neighborhood for the virtue theorist, again posed by the empirical philosopher. It has been argued²⁹ that the main problem for virtue theory stems not from the lack of character traits, but from the lack of a normative grounding for virtue theory. According to this concern, virtue theory, like all normative theories, owes an answer to the question, “why act morally?” or more precisely, why are the virtues good, or to be followed. Some character traits, while they might seem good, or be good in certain contexts, are nonetheless not virtues. The dictator achieves his ends more effectively if he is ruthless (given his ends and given the context in which he finds himself) but this does not make ruthlessness a *virtue*.

This objection is magnified when we consider the substantial cultural variety in conceptions of flourishing: in contemporary western democracies, individual liberty plays a central role. The flourishing life is the life of freedom. In some eastern cultures, by contrast, flourishing is more of a matter of the good of the collective. Because all virtue theorists are located within one culture or another, when virtue theorists advance a particular conception of flourishing, it may be difficult to avoid reifying the particular proclivities of one’s own culture in proposing (what turns out to be) a pedestrian view of human flourishing and its attendant virtues.³⁰

According to this objector, the virtues get their normative grounding from human nature and from those aspects of our nature that we like, prefer, desire, or value, in short those aspects of our nature that promote our flourishing and depend upon our sentiments. The

²⁹ Jesse Prinz, “The Normativity Challenge: Cultural Psychology Provides the Real Threat to Virtue Ethics,” *Journal of Ethics*, (2009) 13: 117-144.

³⁰ Prinz, *ibid*, p. 134.

grounding of the virtues, the answer to the question why are the virtues good or to-be-promoted, thus relies on a combination of our nature and our sentiments. I want to urge that this picture is not the best answer to the normative grounding of virtue for the virtue theorist; I look to Aristotle to move us toward a better answer.

Consider Aristotle's somewhat unpopular function argument: Aristotle holds the view that the human being, like the eye, the hand, the liver, and so on, has a function. In the same way, plants and non-human animals have functions. Aristotle arrives at his view of the human function by first considering the human function to be either living and reproduction, or to be living and interacting with our environment; he finds, however, that though human beings undoubtedly live, reproduce, and interact with our environment, these are not unique functions of ours (plants and non-human animals have these functions too). He then considers our capacity for reason and finds that this is unique to human beings³¹ and so our function must be "rational activity of the soul," and our good is to perform our function excellently or in accordance with virtue; flourishing then turns out to be "rational activity of the soul in accordance with excellence."³²

Aristotle's view now looks like the normative grounding of the virtues lies in our capacity for reason. But this is not the view of reason recommended by a Kantian, for instance; Aristotle, by contrast, holds that there are two kinds of reason, intellectual reason and practical reason. The human good, on Aristotle's view, is constituted by intellectual *and* practical wisdom. In plainer language, this means that an excellent or flourishing life is one in which a human being

³¹ Reason is likely not unique to human beings. However, it may be possible to hold that other creatures partly share this function with human beings (chimpanzees, dolphins, etc) and that nonetheless our capacity for reason sets our conception of what the good is for us.

³² Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1098^a17.

engages in excellent intellectual activity and excellent practical activity. And it is important to bear in mind that there are many aspects of practical activity: it surely includes ordering one's material reality (making beds, cleaning up after oneself, obtaining food, cooking, etc.), organizing one's time, planning one's day and one's future, engaging in relationships with others, both friendships and family relations, and engaging in broader social relations, and so on. These all form aspects of practical wisdom.

Moreover, the virtues involved in practical wisdom (courage, friendship, temperance, organizational skill, to name just a few) might be developed in any of a variety of culturally influenced ways. Indeed, we need not think that there is but one specification of what good living involves with regard to personal possessions or organization of time or friendship. Rather, Aristotle's view is that good living involves choosing well with regard to friendship, personal organization, ordering one's material reality, and so on.³³ Different individuals, at different times, in different social organizations, may develop these capacities and virtues differently. Aristotle's conception of our function sets broad parameters around what can count as a good human life, but nothing more.

But doesn't this leave the virtue theorist open to the objection that the virtues and flourishing are merely relative to the culture in which we live: one culture values individuality and so in that culture the good is constituted by individual rights, and respect for personal liberty is a virtue; another culture values the collective good and so in that culture the good is constituted by the good of the group and equality is a virtue.

³³ Martha Nussbaum argues for a similar view in her paper, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, (1988): vol. 13 (1), 32-53.

A full reply to this objection is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, I will make one point to suggest the direction for a full reply to this thorny problem. First, we must acknowledge that the human good is partly constituted by the contexts in which we find ourselves. There are, for instance, social contexts or *situations* in which it is not possible for human beings to live excellently. Social oppressions are one such context in which human beings fail to live excellently (this is true of both oppressors and oppressed people, though each for different reasons to different extents). The same is true of famines, wars, and other unjust societies. Nevertheless, the virtue theorist needn't hold that flourishing is *merely* a cultural construct and that whatever a culture believes constitutes the good does in fact constitute the good in that culture. Instead the virtue theorist can hold that what human beings are like (for instance, we are creatures who engage in intellectual and practical reason, we are social creatures, we are creatures with emotions, we are creatures whose moral perception is influenced by our moods, and so on) sets some broad parameters on what can constitute an excellent life for creatures like us.

What an excellent life is, and what the virtues are that lead to living an excellent life, will then be determined partly by our human nature and partly by the cultural contexts or *situations* in which we find ourselves. The concern that in some situations ruthlessness, for example, is a virtue or promotes an individual's well-being is blocked because ruthlessness is not conducive to excellence in practical reason (living ruthlessly will not be conducive to being a friend or being a member of a collective, or to working with others, and so on, thus ruthlessness is not conducive to practical wisdom in Aristotle's sense). Given the immoral desires the ruthless individual actually has, being ruthless may enable him to effectively achieve

some of his ends, or even satisfy some of his given desires; but a better life would have been available to him had he developed other desires (more pro-social ones) and lived according to those pro-social desires.

In making this point, it is important to circle back to the situationist: one important insight of situationism is that our ability to be morally good, or to live an excellent human life is highly dependent on the circumstances in which we find ourselves. For that reason, it is crucial for the moral philosopher to have an intimate knowledge of human psychology and all new findings about human psychology that are being discovered. It is also crucial to take Aristotle's insight seriously, namely that human beings cannot flourish unless the social contexts in which they live are conducive to flourishing.³⁴ But we need not hold, as the objector suggests, that human flourishing is simply reducible to whatever promotes the well being of an individual in a context. Rather human flourishing is a complex relationship between various capacities of the individual (those involving intellectual and practical reason) and the situations in which the individual exists.

6. It turns out that there is more than a grain of truth in the situationist's argument. Our actions are, to an important extent, influenced by the situations in which we find ourselves. What the situationist does not acknowledge, and what I argue in this paper, is that part of our moral development includes the awareness that our actions, our emotions, our perception, and our judgment can and must include understanding of the affect situations can have on us.

Contemporary psychologists are discovering new insights about human morality all the time. The virtue theorist, with an emphasis on moral development, holds that we can learn to

³⁴ Happiness "needs external goods as well..." including, we can add, a just society. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1099^a34.

be responsive to these insights as they are discovered. Iris Murdoch reminds us that “it is a task to come to see the world as it is.”³⁵ Part of the task of morality, or more precisely, the task of moral development is the task of learning to be sensitive to all of the influences on our ability to be morally virtuous and to flourish. Some of these influences are psychological (as that we are less likely to help when those around us are passive) and some are social (as that oppression, war, famine and the like make it nearly impossible for humans to live an excellent life). Human beings can live excellently only when the roles of these two influences are fully understood throughout our moral and social development.

³⁵ Iris Murdoch, *Ibid.* p. 91.