A Defense of Social Cognitive Theory in Virtue Ethics

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Virtue is a long-standing important moral category not only in virtue theory but also increasingly in contemporary deontological and consequentialist theories.[1] Ethicists often define virtue according to Aristotle's conception: a disposition to perform the right action, for the right reason, from a firm and unchanging character. However, situationists maintain that the Aristotelian conception of virtue fails to meet the demands of psychological realism, as it is not constrained by findings in human psychology.[2] Aristotelian virtue theory, and trait theory in general, is grounded in a flawed conception of the causes of human behavior as it assumes that human behavior is primarily internally motivated by dispositions that remain more or less consistent across time and diverse situations. Situationists maintain that external motivators, like features of situations, primarily drive human behavior.[3]

One response to this critique has been a move to a model of personality psychology known as social cognitive theory as an alternative foundation in which to ground more empirically realistic conceptions of character without making the move to situationist models of behavior.[4] According to the social cognitive approach, neither individual psychological actors nor situational features alone drive human behavior, but rather the interaction between the two.[5]

In this paper, I defend the move to social cognitive theory against the critiques that: 1) social cognitive theory cannot explain or predict behavior better than competing situationist and trait models and 2) that it is impracticable to predicate a theory of virtue on the social cognitive model. I argue that we can respond to these critiques by making a few small but important distinctions.

Situationism and Virtue Theory

According to the Aristotelian conception of virtue, if an agent has developed the virtues, he knows what action is the right one to perform in a situation and he performs

that action out of a consistent disposition to do so. Virtues are essentially moral character traits. Since virtues drive the agent's behavior, he will behave consistently with his virtues across situations, and distinctly from others who have different traits. Importantly for our discussion, virtue ethics is a normative theory so it prescribes what people *ought* to do to be moral, namely, develop good character by developing the virtues.

However, according to situationists, situational rather than dispositional features predominantly drive human behavior, which is why situational features are on average better predictors than character traits of how an individual will act in a particular situation.[6] Experiments in social psychology have shown that agents behave differently in different situations (their behavior varying along with situational features). Moreover, even if virtues exist, they are very rare in a population.

Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive models move away from both trait and situationist models of personality. According to the social cognitive view of personality, if different situations acquire different meanings for the same individual, then the kinds of expectations, beliefs, goals, and behavioral scripts that are likely to become activated in relation to particular situations will vary. Depending on an individual's history, goals, beliefs, values, etc., that individual will come to form distinct but predictable ways of interpreting situations that will in turn lead to distinct but predictable patterns of behavior.

One influential and popular social cognitive framework is Walter Mischel's "Cognitive-Affective Processing System" (or CAPS). According to Mischel's CAPS theory, patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behavior are all part of personality, as well as "how the person construes (encodes, and appraises) situations (including people and the self) and the beliefs, expectancies, goals, and self-regulatory competencies that became activated within the individual in the continuous stream of interactions with situations."[7] Mischel refers to all of these psychological processes under the collective title of cognitive affective units (CAU's).[8]

Mischel believes that we should phrase character traits as conditionals.[9] Trait conditionals are not limited to one or two particular situations, but can be expanded to refer to a wide array of situations. For example, we could state a trait conditional limited to only one type of situation as, "If Jones is at an office party, then he will be friendly." However, Mischel is interested in generalizing conditional traits to cover a number of different situations in order to show behavioral consistency. For example, we might say, "if Jones is in a situation with a group of people he does not know, then he will be shy and not say very much," however, "if Jones is in a situation with a group of people he knows very well, he will be friendly and talkative." These trait conditionals cover a number of situations, all of which include similar situational features from Jones's point of view. Trait conditionals are limited by "psychological situations" or situations as they are construed and appraised by a particular person (which depends on his individual CAU's). If we understand how an agent interprets and appraises situations, we may widen the scope of a conditional trait to all situations that the agent perceives to have similar features; then, we will see high levels of behavioral consistency.[10]

Social Cognitive Theory and Explanatory and Predictive Power

One critique of the move to social cognitive theory has been that social cognitive theory cannot explain behavior better than situationist or trait models.[11] Meanwhile, situationists argue that virtue cannot explain or predict behavior because situational rather than dispositional features largely drive behavior. Situationists advocate a move to "local traits" or traits contextualized by situational features that retain some relative stability across time.

Local traits are highly contextualized traits that are relatively stable across an individual's lifetime but not across different situations. For example, while Alan does not possess the character trait of bravery simpliciter, he possesses the trait of bravery in the face of battle, wild animals, and heights but not necessarily across all situations.[12] The more dissimilar the situations, the lower the consistency correlations are between them.[13] However, this contextualized trait of bravery might be one that Alan displays throughout his lifetime. The move to local traits should help in achieving psychological realism.

Another problem is that the correlations found by Mischel and Shoda for behaviors contextualized by situation are still fairly low (0.47 percent for verbal aggression, 0.41 for compliance, etc.).[14] However, according to social cognitive theorists, predicting individual behavior with any great accuracy would require us to know a great deal not only about the situations but about the particular CAU's of the individual and how the two interact. Raising consistency correlations would likely require longitudinal studies, gathering large amounts of data about a single individual over diverse situations and periods to understand his/her behavior at great depth. With enough data, we might even be able to predict his/her behavior in future situations with great accuracy. One might also gain this sort of information about another agent through years of friendship or some other close relationship with the agent.[15]

One important consideration is that there are at least two separate goals we may have when attempting to explain or predict some particular behavior. One goal is to explain and predict behavior accurately in order to gain a deeper understanding of human behavior, however long or complex the project. The other goal is to explain and predict behavior in cases of expediency, where accuracy and truth are less important, in order to make a prediction about what to expect and how to act or react. For the purpose of everyday quick and approximate attributions, we may only need a sort of superficial understanding of behavior and the ability to predict it with some accuracy, even if our predictions are almost accidentally true (as they would be from quick attributions that result from heuristics and other mental shortcuts). On the other hand, if we seek to understand what drives human behavior, have a thorough explanation of all of the factors involved, and be able to predict an individual's behavior with accuracy (and not merely accidentally), we would need a deeper understanding of all the variables involved to produce individual actions.

Social cognitive theory is useful for the first goal, helping us delve into the complex interaction of multifarious psychological factors and understand how these inner workings, together with features of a situation, produce human behavior. It may help give us a richer and more thorough, if more complex, understanding of human

behavior. However, this approach is not helpful in situations where this data simply is not available or there is not any time to consider it. This is where trait or situationist models of human behavior may be useful. Take the following example: On my drive home, I see a car speeding and weaving through traffic without using traffic signals or attending to proper distances between vehicles. I consider the explanation from trait theory, that the person driving the car is reckless, thoughtless about the safety and/or feelings of others. I also consider the explanation from situationism that he is on his way to an emergency, but considering probabilities, conclude that this is unlikely. In this scenario, there is little to no data available to me about the driver. What is their mental state? What are their goals or values? Did they even *see* that car they just cut off? Are they on their way to an emergency? All I can do is make a conjecture based on probabilities and my experiences with other drivers.

Regardless of whether I attribute his behavior to recklessness or an emergency, I predict that being near this car is dangerous and move out of their way and let them pass. Whether his reckless driving is a result of an emergency or simply his being a reckless driver is not really relevant or helpful in this situation. If a little ways further along the road, I see that the speeding car has gotten into an accident I will conclude that my decision to move out of the way was the correct one.

In cases like this, where an action needs to be taken, and I lack the information to make an accurate attribution, social cognitive theory is not only useless (because I have neither the time nor information to form an informed belief), it is probably unnecessary. My decision to move out of the way, whether it was made because of my attributing a particular trait to the driver ("he is reckless") or because I attributed his behavior to particular situational features ("he's on his way to an emergency"), was correct, whether or not my explanation about the causes of his behavior was correct.

The problems begin if I assume that because my prediction is true, my explanation about the causes of his behavior was also (non-accidentally) correct. I do not know the driver and I do not recognize the car from previous experiences where the driver behaved recklessly. I do not have nearly enough information to make any kind of accurate explanation of his behavior.

Let us expand my reckless driver scenario into a situation where the social cognitive approach would be useful and my explanation and prediction of his behavior according to either trait or situationist models is revealed as deeply flawed. Suppose I meet this reckless driver (Smith) later. He is a new employee in my department. The accuracy of my explanation is suddenly of greater importance. Suppose I have attributed recklessness to Smith. This attribution may come to mean a great deal to what I think about him, how I treat him, how much I trust him (whether I trust him to drive the carpool!).

There are some important things to notice here: 1) If my attribution is incorrect, then I have unfairly judged him; this incorrect attribution may make me biased against him, 2) even if my attribution of his being a reckless *driver* is correct, his recklessness may not extend past his driving. In the case of my incorrect attribution, I may form opinions and expectations about Smith and his behavior that affect how I treat Smith, which will in turn affect how he treats *me* and I may never even discover my

error. Even if my attribution is accidentally correct, it may still turn out that outside of highway driving, Smith is a decent person, not reckless at all. Something about his particular construal of driving makes him behave one way on the roads and completely differently off them.

Suppose that Smith's driving was not due to an emergency; Smith always drives recklessly. If we can understand what it is about highway driving that leads Smith to drive the way he does, we can understand why he can still be a decent moral person outside of these situations. Suppose Smith becomes a good friend. I learn that he never forgets birthdays or special days. He looks out for other people and thinks we should do the most we can to help others. He is an excellent friend, a reliable worker, a fantastic father, etc. However, I also learn that he does not see his driving as reckless at all. He sees it as tightly controlled driving. From his point of view, he is paying close attention to the road, the feel of the engine, the grip of the tires on the pavement. He feels that he knows exactly what he is doing. Driving is exhilarating and fun and there is nothing thoughtless about the way he drives because he is not getting in anyone else's way. It is harmless fun.

Now, Smith may be completely incorrect about his driving being merely harmless fun. He may in fact be putting people in danger because he is incorrect in his assumption about how much control he has over his car. We may make the judgment that Smith *is* in fact a reckless driver, whether he sees it that way or not. He is simply mistaken about what safety and concern for others involves. However, making this judgment would be the proper work of a theory of virtue to decide. At the empirical level, we are not passing normative judgments about behavior, merely understanding it.

Conditional traits as postulated in Mischel's CAPS framework are similar to local traits in that they are contextualized by situation; however, unlike local traits, they are not based in the assumption that behavior is purely or even primarily situationally driven. The reason that an agent's personality is made up of these kinds of conditional traits is not that situational factors alone drive behavior, but rather that situational factors interact with a person's goals, beliefs, desires, values, and construal to elicit certain behaviors.[16] The pattern of behavioral variability from one type of situation to another is not entirely random. According to Mischel, "if behaviors are stable within each type of situation but varied from one type to another" the pattern of the variation should be stable and characteristic for each individual.[17]

Suppose we attribute a local trait to Smith of being "reckless when driving." This helps us predict Smith's behavior only when driving. What is it about driving that makes Smith reckless in those particular situations? How might we generalize this type of behavior to other similar situations? What would make those situations similar (for Smith) so that we could predict in what situations Smith would react in a similar fashion? While it might be useful for quick and approximate attributions to know that Smith is a reckless driver (thus satisfying one goal of explanation and prediction), we wouldn't have a very deep understanding of Smith's behavior in the end. We might just end up with a list of situationally contextualized traits that tell us little about Smith's behavior in other situations, or help us understand it in any meaningful way.

Social Cognitive Theory and the Virtues

Another critique of social cognitive theory is that we cannot construct a theory of virtue based on social cognitive theory because social cognitive traits are defined internally. Situations, on a social cognitive analysis, are not objective events, with one clear objective definition on which all agents can agree; instead, they are unique to a particular agent. Social cognitive theorists include an agent's unique construal or perspective as part of the definition of a situation. While this definition might be useful for understanding an agent's point of view, why a certain action seemed appropriate etc., it is less useful if the purpose is to discover or achieve normative behavioral consistency in a population. If we assume the truth of social cognitive theory, we have to make the move to the type of "local" traits prescribed by situationists; traits contextualized by situation.

An important distinction requiring consideration here is that the critique that social cognitive theory is not useful for explaining and predicting behavior is a critique of the usefulness of social cognitive theory as an empirical descriptive theory. On the other hand, the critique asking whether social cognitive theory can ground an Aristotelian theory of virtue (or any theory of virtue at all) is a critique of the use of social cognitive theory as a normative theory.At the theoretical level are questions about what virtuous behavior *ought* to look like, the requirements of virtue, about how to guide moral behavior. At the empirical level are questions of what human behavior actually *does* look like and, more importantly for psychological realism, what it *can* look like; questions about the explanation and prediction of human behavior.

For a theory to meet the demands of psychological realism, answers to the empirical questions should inform and limit answers to the normative questions. However, the normative theory need not be a direct reflection of the empirical theory grounding it. While we may make some changes to the normative theory based on what we learn about the limitations of human behavior (for example, altering or entirely eliminating a requirement for cross-situational behavioral consistency requirement), this move is completely debatable, depending on what we hope to achieve with a particular virtue theory. Grounding a theory in social cognitive theory does not necessarily mean the corresponding theory of virtue has to assume all virtues and character traits are conditional or contextualized. We may use social cognitive theory not to define the normative requirements of virtue but merely to ensure that we do not demand the impossible. Social cognitive theory, in its basic form, is a largely descriptive theory, with the goal of describing and understanding human behavior on an individual level. Virtue theory is a normative theory with the goal of achieving a type of behavioral consistency that assumes there *is* one right reading of a situation (or a limited number of right readings) and one (or a limited number) of correct responses.

This obviously does not mean social cognitive theory has no place within a framework for a theory of virtue. We need not use social cognitive theory to set the standards for the normative requirements of virtue (beyond giving us some idea of the limits of behavioral consistency). Yet, it may still help us with empirical questions of the types of self-regulatory mechanisms and skills involved in achieving consistency. We may learn why some people behave more consistently than others do by learning what it

is about their particular combination of construal, goals, beliefs and self-regulatory mechanisms that leads them to behave with greater cross-situational consistency than others. We may be able to learn if particular skills, abilities, or intellectual virtues may be useful for behavioral consistency and we should thus incorporate them into a normative theory of virtue.

Conclusion

The move to social cognitive models of personality has been criticized as 1) not being useful in helping us explain or predict moral behavior (or, alternatively, not providing a better explanation than the competing situationist and trait models) and 2) as not providing a viable theory on which to model a normative theory of virtue. I have argued that social cognitive is useful for some types of explanation and prediction but not others. Moreover, if we do not want to define the normative requirements of a theory of virtue solely on social cognitive theory it can still provide us with information that can help us in setting those standards. By giving us insight into what causes and influences human behavior, we can understand what limitations we may need to build into a normative theory of virtue that meets psychological realism.

Notes

1. For examples see: See Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York; Oxford UP, 1993), 27-120; Robert M. Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good* (New York: Oxford UP, 2006); Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). Since the virtues are a subcategory of character traits, a challenge to the existence of character is equally a challenge to the existence of virtue. In this paper, I use the two terms somewhat interchangeably.

2. Owen Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991), 15. Owen Flanagan's call for psychological realism was a critique of normative theories that made empirical claims about human nature while paying little attention to work in psychology and other human sciences. Flanagan defined psychological realism as a "constraining [of] ethical theory according to findings in psychology about cognition, the self, moral development and situational sensitivity.

Elsewhere in the book (Flanagan, 32), Flanagan frames his discussion of "psychological realism" in terms of minimal psychological realism, which is defined as: "[making] sure when constructing a moral theory or projecting a moral ideal that the character, decision processing, and behavior prescribed are possible, or are perceived to be possible for creatures like us."

3. See Lee Ross and Richard E. Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1991), 1-26.

4. See Nancy Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence: An Empirically Grounded Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Candace Upton, *Situational Traits of Character: Dispositional Foundations and Implications for Moral Psychology and Friendship* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009); and to some extent Kamtekar, Rachana. "Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of our Character," *Ethics 114* (2004): 458-491.

5. See Walter Mischel, "The Interaction of Person and Situation," in *Personality at the Crossroads: Current Issues in Interactional Psychology,* ed. David Magnusson and Norman

Endler (Hillsdale: Erlbaum, 1977): 333-352; Walter Mischel, "Toward an Integrative Science of the Person," *Annual Reviews in Psychology 55* (2004): 1-22; Cervone and Tripathi, *Personality, Identity, and Character*, 30-51; Darcia Narvaez and Daniel K. Lapsley, eds., *Personality, Identity, and Character: Explorations in Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009); and Albert Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Thought and Action," in *Handbook of Moral Behavior and Development*, eds. William Kurtines, Jacob Gewirtz, and Jacob Lamb (Hillsdale: Erlbaum, 1991): 45-103.

6. See Lee Ross and Richard E. Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1991), 1-26.

7. Mischel, "Toward an Integrative Science of the Person," 4. Self-regulatory competencies refer to control mechanisms that operate in response to social sanctions or self-reactive influence. The major self-regulatory mechanism operates through self-monitoring of conduct, judgment of conduct in relation to personal standards and environmental circumstances and affective self-reaction (the emotion an individual feels in response his own conduct). (See Albert Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Thought and Action" in *Handbook of Moral Behavior and Development*, eds. William Kurtines and Jacob Gewirtz *(*Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1991), 68.

8. Mischel, "Toward an Integrative Science of the Person," 11. Mischel argues that there are essentially five types of CAU's: encodings, goals and values, expectancies and beliefs, affects, and competencies and self-regulatory competencies. Different individuals will have different CAU's. As an agent experiences situations that contain different psychological features, different "CAU's and their characteristic interrelationships become activated in relation to these features," so the activation of CAU's changes from one situation to another.

9. Mischel, "Toward an Integrative Science of the Person," 8.

10. One philosopher that argues in favor of the social-cognitivist tradition in psychology is Nancy Snow, who argues that perhaps the reason that cross-situational consistency in behavior is so hard to come by is that we are expecting the wrong sort of consistency. Snow argues in favor Walter Mischel and Michael Shoda's conceptualization of personality as a cognitive-affective processing system (CAPS) which consists of social-cognitive units like beliefs, desires, feelings, goals, expectations, values, and self-regulatory plans.

Snow also believes that there is a possibility for "global" character," what Doris terms "robust" character, or traits that are cross-situationally consistent. She believes that the way this is possible is essentially what Robert Adams had hypothesized, that a collection of local traits can be aggregated together to form more robust traits. Although Snow points out that some local traits may just stay local, if there is nothing to make the agent perceive that other situations are similar and call for the same sorts of behavioral responses. They will still probably not be so robust as to satisfy Doris's definition of a robust trait, but they will show much more consistency in behavior than taken alone. What will bind these traits together will be an agent's construal of the situations as similar, thus calling for similar behavioral responses. Snow argues that what the factors that will motivate an agent's construal are things like the agent's beliefs or desires, and more importantly, their goals.

11. Mark Alfano, *Character as Moral Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 78.

12. Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002), 62. At one point Doris says even this definition is not narrow enough because it is features of the situation and not John's character that determine his behavior after all, so one might have to hedge it further and say, John is brave in the face of gun battle but not battles with cannons or at sea, etc.

13. Doris cites Hartshorne and May's study as evidence for this.

14. Alfano, 78.

15. This explains why we can often give nuanced descriptions and accurate predictions of

the behavior of people we know well.

16. Mischel, "Toward an Integrative Science of the Person," 8.
17. Mischel, "Toward an Integrative Science of the Person," 6.

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