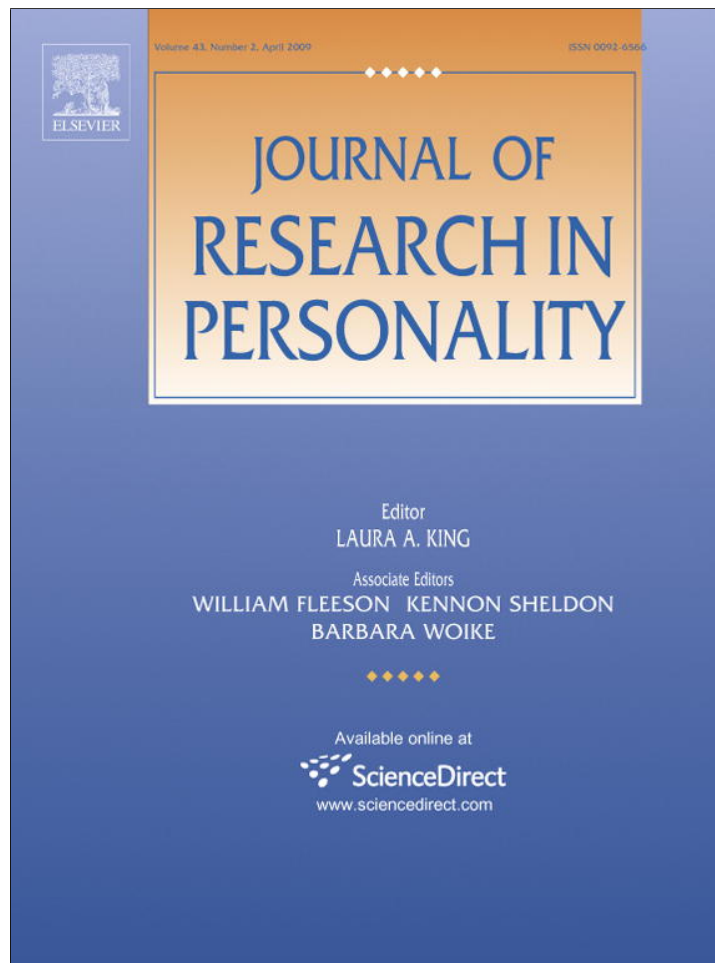


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Virtue ethics and the social psychology of character: Philosophical lessons from the person–situation debate

John T. Jost^{a,*}, Lawrence J. Jost^b^a Department of Psychology, New York University, 6 Washington Place, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10003, United States^b Department of Philosophy, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH 45221, United States

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A venerable tradition of ethical theory drawing on Aristotle's *Ethics* still flourishes alongside consequentialist (utilitarian) and deontological (Kantian) alternatives. The Aristotelian notion is that if humans develop in themselves and inculcate in others certain *settled dispositions* to reason and act in characteristic ways—bravely, honestly, generously—they will behave in ways that secure and preserve *eudaimonia* (happiness or well-being) for themselves and others (Burnyeat, 1980; Hursthouse, 1999; Sherman, 1997). Virtue theorists are therefore committed to the existence of significant moral personality traits that not only summarize good (vs. bad) behavior but also explain the actions of the virtuous (and vicious) agents.

A powerful empirical challenge to virtue theories developed out of Mischel's (1968) critique of personality traits and social psychological research emphasizing the “power of the situation” (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). These lessons were applied, perhaps overzealously, to moral philosophy by Flanagan (1991), Harman (1999), Doris (2002), and Appiah (2008). Harman (1999) claimed: “We need to convince people to look at situational factors and to stop trying to explain things in terms of character traits... [and] to abandon all talk of virtue and character, not to find a way to save it by reinterpreting it” (p. 1). This position, which might be termed *eliminative situationalism*, stimulated useful philosophical debate, but it is too dismissive of the role of personality (or character) in producing ethically responsible behavior.

The skeptical case was based largely on situationalist interpretations of classic social psychology experiments, such as Darley

and Batson's (1973) demonstration that only 10% of seminary students who were late for a lecture on the Good Samaritan parable assisted a stranger in need, whereas 63% of early seminarians helped. But 25 years later Batson (1998, p. 284) agreed that “dispositional predictors have fared better than in earlier work,” citing Staub's (1974) research in which “a prosocial orientation index (combining measures of feelings of personal responsibility, social responsibility, moral reasoning, prosocial values, and a low level of Machiavellianism)” significantly predicted helping behavior across a variety of circumstances.

The strongest empirical case for stable character traits comes from research on “Big Five” personality dimensions that exhibit cross-situational consistency and predict real-world behavior (Costa & McCrae, 1988). At least one dimension, conscientiousness, should have significant moral implications, along the lines of Aristotle's concept of “virtue” as capturing goodness in life and work. Hogan (2005) found, for instance, that conscientiousness predicts both leadership and occupational performance.

Moral philosophy has much to learn from psychology but the results do not warrant *eliminative situationalism*. The real lesson from empirical studies is not that character traits fail to exist, but that behavior is the product of a complex *interaction* between the person and the situation (Funder, 2006; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Snyder & Cantor, 1998). Moral credit and blame are not *impossible* to assign, though they may be harder to assign than ethicists once imagined. It may even be necessary to take into account responsibility for the moral *environments* (or situations) that social actors bring about (or perpetuate). This is not the first time philosophers have been compelled to revise conclusions based on scientific research nor, we suspect, the last.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: john.jost@nyu.edu (J.T. Jost).

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