



Pitting Virtue Ethics Against Situationism: An Empirical Argument for Virtue

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Abstract

Situationists maintain that psychological evidence (e.g., the well-known Good Samaritan experiment) challenges a key assumption of virtue ethics, namely that virtuous people display cross-situational consistency of behavior. This *situationist critique* is frequently thought to pose a serious threat to virtue ethics. Virtue ethicists have so far mainly put forward conceptual rather than empirical arguments against situationism. In this paper, we examine the extent to which a plausible *empirical* argument can be developed against situationism, and in favor of virtue ethics. We note that such an argument will naturally entail empirical simplification, and consequently concessions from both sides of the debate will be required. We argue, however, that with such concessions in place, the debate between situationists and virtue ethicists can be captured by a claim about the way that virtuous behavior may change when situations change. We report the results of an experiment (conducted twice, for replication) showing how social science methods can be introduced to the situationism debate to test such a claim empirically. Our results offer tentative support for eudaemonist and agent-based varieties (but not for target-centered) versions of virtue ethics.

Keywords Situationism · Virtue ethics · Courage · Situational pressure · Curvilinearity

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1 Introduction

This paper examines to what extent a plausible empirical argument in favor of virtue ethics and against situationism might be developed. Virtue theorists adopt a *dispositionalist* account of human behavior. Committing themselves to the existence of acquired mental traits called *virtues*, they follow a paradigm in philosophical ethics that goes back at least as far as to Aristotle, who thought of virtues as dispositions that make their possessors a good person and cause them to perform their function well.

John Doris (1998, 2002) and Gilbert Harman (2000), among others, have put forward a challenge to the dispositionalist assumption of virtue ethics (also see Flanagan 1991; Railton 1995). If ethical behavior is guided by stable dispositions, it must be cross-situationally consistent, they argue. But, they maintain, assuming the existence of virtues as dispositions lacks empirical support. They argue that no such cross-situational consistency can be witnessed: rather than dispositions, it is *situations* that determine how people act, hence the term *situationism*.

While a lively debate has ensued among philosophers (e.g. Kamtekar 2004; Sabini and Silver 2005; Webber 2006), most virtue ethical arguments attack situationism on conceptual rather than empirical grounds (cf. Cohen and Morse 2014; Miller 2013; Prinz 2009; West 2017). A result of this is that the dialectic of the debate is decidedly skewed: situationists have empirical *and* conceptual arguments to their disposal; virtue ethicists *only* apply conceptual arguments. Situationists quote empirical research purportedly showing the defects of virtue ethics, to which virtue ethicists respond on conceptual grounds that this research misses target. The situationists then either accept the conceptual challenge and come back with new *empirical* work, or provide a *conceptual* argument against virtue ethics, to which the virtue ethicists only seem capable of responding conceptually.

We think that it would change the dialectic for the better if also on the side of virtue ethics empirical arguments were made available. Our aim in this paper is therefore to try and examine what such empirical arguments might look like. We show that the debate between situationists and virtue ethicists can be captured by an empirical claim about the *shape* of the correlation between the pressure that particular situations exercise on agents, and the behavior these agents display in these situations. We show, first, that this correlation is *tildeshaped* and *curvilinear* (see below for details), and then present results of empirical research examining this claim. Our findings provide evidence against situationism, and in favor of a variety of versions of virtue ethics as well as utilitarian and Kantian conceptions of virtue.

We address one potential worry before we proceed. If one has good reasons to think that the empirical work invoked by situationists does not constitute a genuine threat to the soundness of virtue ethics, then one is likely to have good reasons to think that the empirical work we present in this paper is quite unnecessary to *defend* virtue ethics' soundness. We agree. Our aim is therefore *not* to offer a fully-fledged and independent defense of virtue theory. Rather what we do is to try and argue with the situationists using *their* methods. We grant the situationist, for the sake of argument, that it makes sense to assume that virtue theory entails particular empirical consequences, as that is clearly what the situationists are committed to. And then we show that once such concession is in place, our empirical work offers evidence in favor of virtue ethics rather than situationism. We do not, then, provide an independent argument in favor of that concession itself. But we do examine the extent to which our empirical findings can be used in support of some key approaches to virtue theory

that have been discussed in the literature, and conclude they support eudaemonist and agent-based approaches to virtue ethics, but may not support target-centered accounts.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first discuss some background and introduce our representation of situationism and virtue ethics. We then provide some information about the way we tested this model empirically (where technical details are kept to an absolute minimum) and what our findings entail for virtue theory.¹ We conclude with a general discussion.

2 Representing Virtue

Let us start with a quick overview of the psychology research situationists cite. One classic study showed that whether or not participants helped a person (who dropped a folder full of papers) is highly correlated with whether a few minutes earlier participants found an unexpected coin in the return slot of a phone booth after they had made a call (Isen and Levin 1972). In another classic study, students of the Princeton Theological Seminary were told to give a short talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan in a nearby venue (Darley and Batson 1973). On their way, they found a shabbily dressed confederate (a person who, unbeknownst to the participants, was helping the researchers) who appeared to be in distress. Most of the students who believed they had enough time to stop did so and offered their help. The vast majority of those who were primed to believe that they were late, however, did not stop.

These and similar studies seem to show that people may respond to the circumstances of a particular situation in ways that conflict with traits or principles that they think govern their behavior (see, e.g., Alzola 2008 for an overview). As a result, situationists believe that virtues do not exist (Harman 2000), or have no effect on human behavior (Doris 1998).

A lot is at stake for the virtue ethicist. After decades of fairly widespread neglect in many circles in philosophy, virtue ethics has become a normative view just as prominent as Kantian ethics and utilitarianism. Virtue ethics is not only the subject of fundamental philosophical investigation, but it has also become an important source for applied ethics. It is therefore understandable that virtue ethicists see situationism as potentially a serious challenge to their work. If cogent, situationism has consequences for the way regulation and appeals to civic virtue can be used to foster legal compliance (McTernan 2014). Situationism threatens to undermine traditional and still widely embraced views of human and corporate responsibility (Doris and Murphy 2007; Nelkin 2005). It challenges conceptions of moral education (Messina and Surprenant 2015), and, if cogent, it necessitates giving up on a host of everyday moral concepts used to discuss our moral relations such as trust, trustworthiness, gratitude, and resentment (D'Cruz 2015).

Several strategies have been developed to avert the situationist threat. To begin with, publication bias may (partly) explain why one rarely finds published studies *failing* to show a statistically significant correlation (i.e. studies that would offer empirical support for virtue ethics, or at least against situationism). Setting these concerns aside, some virtue ethicists acknowledge the situationist findings to some extent, but argue that the behavior observed in situationist experiments can be explained by reference to ignorance and weakness of will rather than situational factors (Murray 2015). Some authors also think that people may avert the negative impact of situational factors by becoming aware of them (Mele and Shepherd 2013), or that the situationist objection is based on an implausible

¹ Supplementary materials are available from the authors upon request.

distinction between situation and person (Sarkissian 2010). Another line of defense is that virtue ethics is fully capable of explaining the situationist data, and that, in fact, the virtue ethical explanation is better than the situationist (Hutton 2006; Webber 2006).

While there is a burgeoning literature evaluating situationism from an empirical point of view (Cohen and Morse 2014; Miller 2013; Prinz 2009; West 2017), the main impression one gets when one studies the ways in which virtue ethicists have responded to the situationist challenge is that these responses are by and large conceptual. They boil down to arguing that what the situationist experiments are concerned with overlooks essential characteristics of the concept of virtue (so the situationists miss target), or to more general methodological objections concerning the validity of generalizing experimental results.

We acknowledge the importance of such conceptual and methodological responses to situationism, but as we indicated in the introduction, the aim of the present paper is to see to what extent we can confront the situationist challenge using *empirical* arguments. Clearly the risk of such an endeavor is that the simplification inherent in empirical research will alienate some virtue ethicists, as the way we represent virtue ethics necessarily abstracts from a number of characteristics of the concept of virtue. Yet also to these readers, we offer something new. Most of these scholars seem to think that *if* indeed these simplifications are being granted, then empirical research does indeed show that virtue ethics is in danger. Our paper shows that this is not the case: even if we grant the simplifications, our empirical results provide evidence in favor of various forms of virtue ethics, and against situationism. We will now explain these simplifications, that is, we discuss how we represent virtue ethics and situationism (Fig. 1, 2).

As we suggested earlier, the thought behind this paper is to characterize the debate between situationists and virtue ethicists as a disagreement about the shape of the relation between situation and behavior. To anticipate the more detailed discussion below, we represent the proponent of situationism as being committed to the view that there is a fairly steep and monotone decreasing linear relation between situational pressure and virtuous behavior. More plainly put, we take situationists to hold on to the view that the extent (or degree) to which a person displays virtuous behavior decreases when situational pressure increases. And we capture virtue ethics as entailing the view that the relation between situational pressure and virtuous behavior is, by contrast, a tilde-shaped curvilinear relation: virtuous behavior is quite stable and constant in mid-range, standard situations of varying situational pressure, and only decreases in more extreme situations of situational pressure. We will soon define with more precision what the difference is (the graphs in Fig. 3 give some impression), but what is important here is to stress again that the novelty of our approach here is among others that we represent the situationist debate as one about the *shape* of the correlation between situational pressure and virtuous behavior.

We now give further details backing our representation of situationism and virtue ethics as well as about the way we phrase the empirical claim that we test. Our argumentation proceeds in two steps. We start with an initial approximation of situationism and virtue ethics (“Step one”), which we subsequently refine by examining the consequences of virtue ethics’ commitment to the view that virtues are *acquired dispositions* (“Step two”).

Step one As a starting point we consider the following representation of virtue ethics. According to this conception, the situation in which an agent acts plays no role whatsoever in explaining the extent to which they exercise virtue or not. All that counts in this first step, and all that is needed to explain the extent to which an agent acts virtuously, is the

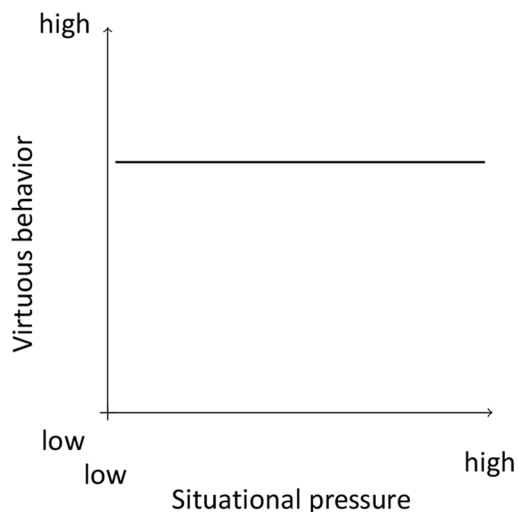
agent's virtue (or lack thereof). If we represent this by means of a graph, we get a relation between situation and behavior that is *constant*: the degree of virtue a person displays does not vary across situations of varying pressure. This initial approximation of virtue ethics is represented in Fig. 1.

Now we turn to situationism. Situationists make, roughly, two slightly different sorts of claim. One is that the data show that virtues do not exist (Harman 2000). The other is that the data show that, even though virtues do exist, the degree to which virtues have an effect on human behavior is so small that they are useless for the purpose of understanding and guiding behavior (Doris 1998).² This difference is important conceptually, but it is crucial to realize that both versions of situationism draw from the very same body of empirical research. To see what such research does, consider again the Good Samaritan experiment (Darley and Batson 1973), which showed that a person's helping another person in distress depends on the degree of time pressure they experience at the moment they are confronted with the person in need. The way this was tested was to create three groups of participants. All of them were instructed to prepare a small lecture on the parable of the Good Samaritan; some participants were told that they faced "high" time pressure, others that they faced "medium" time pressure, and still others that they faced "low" time pressure.³ The researchers then observed that the number of high-pressure participants stopping to help the person in distress was significantly lower than the number of helping medium-pressure participants, which was again lower than the number of low-pressure helpers.

A standard way to capture this is to say that the correlation between helping behavior and time pressure is a decreasing function. Or if we follow the situationists and generalize this observation, the claim is that the correlation between situational pressure and virtuous behavior is a decreasing function: if situational pressure goes up, virtuous behavior goes

Fig. 1 Virtue ethics (Step one)

Note. The figure plots the degree of virtuous behavior against situational pressure, as the first approximation to modelling the virtue ethical position has it



² More advanced versions of situationism have been defended (Alfano 2013; Miller 2013) taking into account some of the earlier critiques that virtue ethicists had voiced against Doris and Harman (cf. Upton 2016).

³ The intensity of time pressure was randomly determined; that is to say, participants were randomly assigned to one of the three groups.

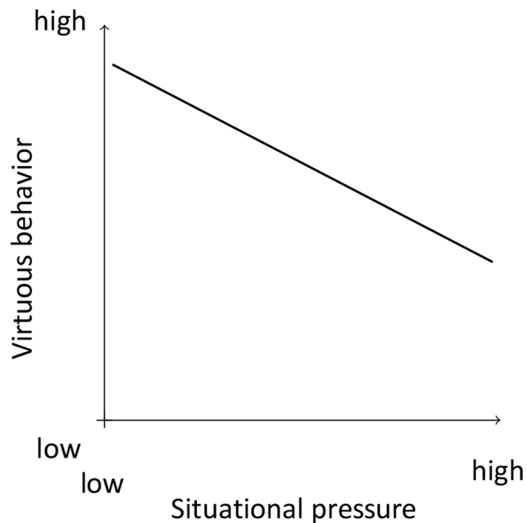
down. This is true irrespective of whether one believes that the evidence shows there are no virtues (as Harman does), or whether one believes that the evidence shows virtues have no explanatory power (as Doris does). The core of both versions of situationism is the claim that empirical evidence shows that the relation between situational pressure and virtuous behavior is a decreasing function.⁴ The simplest way to represent this is displayed graphically in Fig. 2. More technically, we could express this by saying that the relation between situational pressure and virtuous behavior is a monotonically decreasing negative and linear relation.

The term *virtuous* in *virtuous behavior* may sound a bit out of place here, to virtue ethicists and situationists alike. Situationist may not want to use it as, they think, it lacks meaning (Harman 2000), or has no explanatory value (Doris 1998, 2002). Virtue ethicists, in turn, may feel that using *virtuous* to describe *behavior* (rather than a person, or perhaps their character) erroneously suggests that whether in a given situation a person's behavior is the result of the exercise of virtue can be read off the behavior without further attention to, for instance, the agent's intentions and motivations.

It is true that we introduce simplifications in order to arrive at something that can be empirically tested. We take behavior as a "proxy" for virtue, and in a perhaps somewhat crude sense we will assume that we can say, of certain behaviors, that a virtuous person would be more or less likely to perform them. Situationists may not be bothered too much, as they already make very similar assumptions when they interpret and use existing psychology research. But virtue ethicists may be worried. They may say that it is exactly because the situationist makes a similar simplifying assumption that the situationist critique misses the point, and they may think that any attempt to shake up the situationist debate that joins

Fig. 2 Situationism (Step one)

Note. The figure plots the degree of virtuous behavior against situational pressure, according to situationism



⁴ To be precise, not any decreasing function will do: there has to be a decrease in virtuous behavior all the way from low to high pressure. The situationist excludes, for instance, a correlation between situational pressure and virtuous behavior where the level of virtuous behavior remains the same for a whole range of situations of different degrees of pressure, and only decreases at various intervals.

the situationist in making very similar assumptions will lead nowhere – or at least not to a vindication of virtue ethics. We hope, however, that worried virtue ethicists will set aside their misgivings for the time being, and find it at least somewhat relevant to see that *even if* we do make these assumptions, virtue ethics, not situationism, comes out winning. In other words, we believe that the virtue ethicist gets in a better position argumentatively if we can show that even if we grant the situationist the reduction of virtue to behavior, we still get support for virtue ethics.

Step two We now refine this first approximation of situationism and virtue ethics. The refinement has to do with the fact that virtues are thought of as *acquired*, and as *dispositions*. In a view that is often associated with Aristotle, virtues are acquired stable dispositions to steer the middle course between two extremes the exercise of which contributes to the good life. As we argue later in the paper, these assumptions are shared by most current approaches to virtue ethics, and can also plausibly be attributed to some utilitarian and Kantian views of virtue. This refinement does not, then, limit the scope of our argument. It is worth slowing down a bit to emphasize these two key elements: acquisition and disposition.

The first point is that virtues are *acquired*. Acquisition of virtue starts at a very early age, and is never completely finished. It is a lifelong learning process. People practice virtues in new and difficult circumstances, and maintain and hone them in familiar and less challenging situations. In novel situations, where one may have only rather inchoate ideas about what virtue demands, learning typically involves copying the behavior of exemplars first, which subsequently leads to one's understanding these issues for oneself (Annas 2005; Hills 2009). In the words of Rachana Kamtekar, “[c]orrect Aristotelian habituation ... involves the discovery of (some of) the intrinsic value of virtuous actions in doing them” (2004, 481).

It is important to observe that acquiring virtue is no different from other forms of knowledge acquisition in that it entails the continuous possibility of *error*. At a given point in time, one may not have discovered the intrinsic value of virtuous action yet. The amount of practice one has had may turn out to be insufficient for the challenges one currently faces. One may have copied less than suitable (not very virtuous) role models, or one may not have copied them in the right way or to the right degree. A result of this is that people will err in the way they (attempt to) exercise virtue, at least now and then. Virtue, that is, comes in degrees. So for our purposes it is important to observe that while a person who is very prone to error should not be said to possess virtue, most forms of virtue ethics are so construed that some degree of error does not make someone lack virtue entirely. Barring saints, perhaps, we all err.

Second, virtues are *dispositions*. To say that virtues are dispositions may be taken to mean that they give a 100% guarantee that the disposed-to behavior will actually occur. But then again only saints would, perhaps, possess virtue. That is why it is more common to hold on to the view that dispositions do not fully guarantee the outcome. Hence for the purposes of our empirical study we take virtues to be “non-maximizing” character traits. Virtuous agents are thought to be likely to perform (substantially) more virtuous than unvirtuous actions, but this does not mean a virtuous person never fails.

Taking virtues to be *acquired dispositions* will have repercussions for the shape that the behavior-situation graph will have according to virtue ethics. In situations with very high (or very low) situational pressure, situational pressure will have a more pronounced effect on the extent to which an agent exercises virtue than in situations with mid-range situational pressure. If situational pressure is very high – that is, the situation is exceptionally

unfavorable to exercising virtue – the virtue ethicist should expect the disposition to be activated less often than in mid-range situations. This may happen, for instance, due to the fact that the agent has not practiced virtue in such situations very frequently. Conversely, in exceptionally favorable situations, one should expect a greater degree of virtuous behavior than what could be explained by the mere activation of an existing disposition. This may happen when procedures are automatized, or when people are “nudged” in such a way that error is (almost) literally (or physically) impossible: the observed behavior exceeds the level that should be expected on the basis of the dispositions of individual people.

This observation entails that the representation of virtue ethics in Fig. 1 (the constant, straight line) has to be revisited. Virtue ethics is better grasped by a what is called a *tilde-shaped* and *curvilinear* relation between degree of virtue and situational pressure, of the sort as depicted in Fig. 3.⁵ In situations of fairly common mid-range situational pressure, the correlation is indeed a constant, straight line. But when we consider exceptionally favorable and exceptionally unfavorable situational pressure, we do have to allow for influence of situational pressure on behavior. In other words, if virtues are, as is assumed here, acquired dispositions, a person’s ability to withstand the pressure and act virtuously is particularly present in mid-range situations, which means that a decrease (or increase) of pressure will have little or no effect on the level of virtue. The two extremes (very high or very low pressure), by contrast, represent situations with fewer opportunities for learning. As a result of this, the transition from low to mid-range situational pressure, and from mid-range to high situational pressure should be expected to be more steep.⁶ That is why we say that the relation between situational pressure and virtuous behavior is a tilde-shaped curvilinear relation, with a steep decline at both extremes of the spectrum, and a fairly flat middle part representing a non-maximal, but fairly constant degree of virtuous behavior.⁷

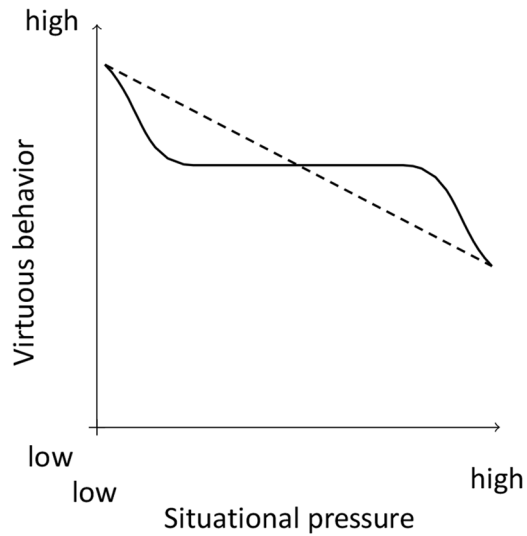
⁵ *Curvilinear* is used as a contrast with *linear*. Technically, the difference is that a curvilinear correlation is expressed using higher-order polynomials (quadratic, cubic, etc.). *Tilde-shaped* is used to describe the specific form of the relation. Not all curvilinear relations are tilde-shaped. All tilde-shaped relations are curvilinear.

⁶ We acknowledge that this model has its limitations. An anonymous reviewer suggested one might expect the relation to be (more) flat towards the low pressure extreme on the grounds that small changes in very favorable situations will not (or only marginally) affect behavior. This is indeed plausible, and may also apply to the high pressure extreme. To incorporate this observation, a more detailed mathematical representation would have “fairly flat” parts at the very extremes of the spectrum, then witness the steep declines, with a “fairly flat” mid-range part again. To test this statistically, we would need higher-order regressions. For the purposes of exposition, we use the simpler model, though. This does not change our findings.

⁷ The claim about the tilde-shaped curvilinear relation between virtue and behavior obtains independent credibility if we adopt Philip Pettit’s (2015) conception of virtue as a *robust good*. For example, for a person to be honest, in Pettit’s sense of the term, they have to tell the truth in actual circumstances as well as in variations of such circumstances “under suitable priming and with suitable support” (2015, 59). The spectrum of situations we consider provides, one could say, increasingly weaker priming and support (the more we move into the direction of the one end of the spectrum), and increasingly stronger priming and support (when we move to the other end of the spectrum).

Fig. 3 Virtue ethics and situationism (Step two)

Note. The figure plots the revised relation between virtuous behavior and situational pressure, according to virtue theory, and situationism (dashed line)



3 Testing Virtue

Even though our representation captures an essential feature of virtue ethics, it is of course a simplification. But as there will be no empirical testing without simplification, we believe that simplification is acceptable in this case. We now turn to a discussion of the results of two studies that we designed and conducted. We discuss these results partly because we think that they are interesting in their own right: they provide evidence in favor of various forms of virtue ethics, and they make use of empirical methods that have so far not been called upon in the situationist debate. But we discuss them also because it allows us to illustrate why such new empirical methods are necessary, which makes them relevant even to readers who are skeptical about the particular experimental design of our studies.

We discuss the main idea first, and then move on to some relevant details. The idea is straightforward. We collaborated in a larger research project on ethical culture conducted among employees of two major European companies, in various EU countries, the Middle-East, and South-East Asia. Among the many survey items, we included two sets of items. One set of items was drawn from work by Sekerka, Bagozzi and Charnigo (2009), which is a standard way to measure what is called *moral courage* in the empirical literature. It is our measure of virtuous behavior, noting of course that we now focus on one virtue only: courage. The other set of items captured situational pressure, and was indebted to work by Peterson (2003) and Shafer (2002). Apart from these two sets of items, a host of other (sets of) items were included in the survey, for methodological reasons.⁸ Respondents answered each item (i.e. question) by way of a six-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree,” ..., 6 = “strongly

⁸ Using existing survey items rather than developing our own items is standard methodology, on the grounds that this guarantees that we use sufficiently widely validated and corroborated items. It also allows us to use standard procedures to mitigate such things as “common method bias” (Podsakoff et al. 2003). See also Lindell and Whitney (2001).

agree”). For each set of items, scores were averaged, with higher scores indicating higher levels of the variable measured.⁹

We used an array of standard techniques to obtain maximally reliable findings. Surveys were offered in English, French, and German (validated through the standard translation and back-translation procedure with four professional bilingual translators). Instruments were pre-tested with a handful of employees, and with researchers not affiliated with our project. Prior to testing our claim (i.e., the claim about the tilde-shaped form of the situation-behavior relation), we conducted confirmatory factor analysis, a statistical technique to determine whether the various sets of items really measure different constructs, which we found they did. Moreover, the two studies involved two companies, both in financial services, and involved employees working in fairly similar environments within the company, which allowed us to use sufficiently fine-tuned and specific questions.¹⁰ Specifically, all respondents had regular contact with customers. Moreover, we knew from earlier work that, from time to time, it is likely that respondents face situational pressure (of different degrees). Situational pressure arises, for instance, from superiors asking employees to circumvent company compliance rules (and national and international laws and rules of conduct) in order to improve business performance. For example, employees may feel pressured by supervisor to effectively assist wealthy customers with potentially criminal records to achieve their financial goals in fraudulent or otherwise illegal or immoral ways. In both companies this was a common concern.

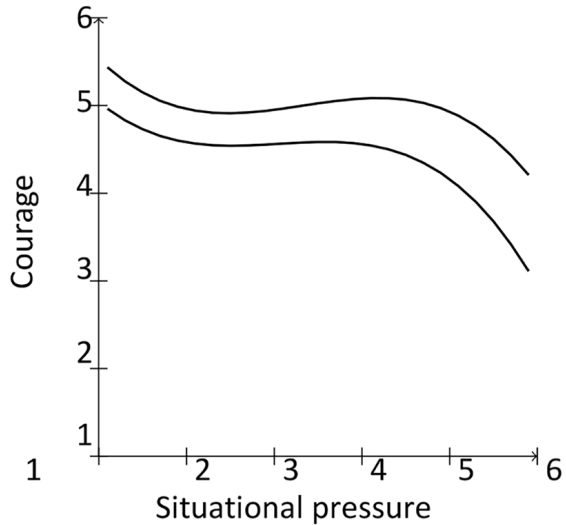
We now report the results. In order to find out whether our data do indeed show a tilde-shaped curvilinear pattern, we took a multi-step approach that is common in the literature (Le et al. 2011). It consists of running a number of regressions (linear, quadratic, and cubic models) with control variables that are standard in the empirical literature. This exercise did indeed lend support to the tilde-shaped curvilinear relation between situational pressure and courage. The coefficients we found are statistically significant, and support the hypoth-

⁹ With about 500 respondents in each study, we obtained considerably more variation for both the situation variable and the behavior variable than in the experiments quoted by the situationist. We should distinguish between two things: (i) the number of participants we have (490 in Study 1, 522 in Study 2, 40 in, e.g., the Good Samaritan experiment (Darley and Batson 1973)), and (ii) the number of potential observations in an experiment. Some background may be useful to grasp this. At a very basic level, we want to gather data and apply statistics to them in order to spot a pattern (the shape of the correlation) in a scatterplot, which is a collection of dots representing the data in a two-dimensional plane (with situational pressure on the X-axis, and virtuous behavior on the Y-axis). Simplifying things a bit, the Good Samaritan experiment only had three different levels of situational pressure (high, medium, low), and six levels of virtuous (helping) behavior, which means that each of their 40 participants had to be assigned to exactly one of $3 \times 6 = 18$ different points in the two-dimensional plane. Whatever the outcome of such an experiment, it will typically be very difficult to decide whether the resulting pattern is linear or curvilinear, a difficulty not unlike that of someone trying to represent all letters of the alphabet on a led display board with a limited number of pixels. So if it is one's aim to examine whether the shape of the relation between situation and behavior is curvilinear, it helps to have as many different points available to represent the data. We have 16 different levels of courage and 16 different levels of situational pressure, so we have $16 \times 16 = 256$ points available, and we have around 500 observations to distribute over these points. It is intuitively clear that this places us in a much better position to judge whether the relation between situation and behavior is linear or curvilinear than if you distribute 40 observations over 18 points.

¹⁰ The standard methodological rationale behind restricting ourselves to one industry that is one's goal is to test whether there is a correlation between two variables (situational pressure and virtuous behavior), it is methodologically desirable to have a homogeneous sample, because otherwise any variation in the data may be attributed to variation in the sample rather than to the hypothesized correlation.

Fig. 4 Courage and situational pressure

Note. The upper graph plots the relation between situational pressure and courage as in the first study (see main text). The lower graph is for the second study (see main text)



esized tilde-shaped pattern.¹¹ All this provides strong evidence to the effect that the correct specification of the relation between situational pressure and courage is tilde-shaped, as the virtue ethicist postulates. To appreciate this, Fig. 4 plots the graphs for both studies (without control variables).¹²

4 Supporting Virtue

Having reached this conclusion, one may ask, however, if there is a form of virtue ethics that our findings specifically support, or a form it fails to support. We said earlier that it is not our aim in this paper to *defend* one particular form of virtue ethics, but rather to show that if we make the type of simplifying concessions that empirical researchers need to make, and consequently represent virtue ethics by way of a tilde-shaped curvilinear relation between behavior and situational pressure, then virtue ethics, not situationism, comes out winning. Of course, we do not wish to suggest that virtue ethics can plausibly be reduced to that tilde-shaped relation only, and, moreover, we acknowledge that some advocates of virtue ethics may not wish to join us in making the assumption. That is why we now consider the question of what the scope of application of our results is, or in other words: what version or versions of virtue ethics do our results support?

To begin with, we would like to broaden the relevance of our results beyond virtue ethics proper. Virtues are not the exclusive province of virtue ethicists. Utilitarians may call *virtues* those dispositions people have to maximize well-being, while Kantians may call *virtues* those dispositions people have to respect each other's autonomy. Even though virtues do

¹¹ In the first study, $p < .01$ for the linear term, $p < .05$ for the other two. In the second study, all $p < .001$.

¹² In the model without control variables, significance of all three coefficients remains the same or increases (in the first study, $p < .001$ for the linear term, $p < .01$ for the other two; in the second study, all remain at $p < .001$).

not play as foundational a role as they play in virtue ethics, they may be just as important to Kantians and utilitarians. What do our results imply for them?

Our results offer support to utilitarian and Kantian virtue. To see this, it is important to go back to the two crucial assumptions on which the tilde-shaped curvilinear relation hinges: that virtues are (i) dispositions, and that virtues (ii) can be acquired. These assumptions have plausibly been made by some utilitarians and Kantians. Julia Driver (2001), for instance, has developed a prominent utilitarian approach according to which virtues are character traits that systematically produce more good than not, which can be acquired. For Driver, the effects of virtue are to be produced in most circumstances rather than only on a few occasions. This “non-maximizing” approach is fully compatible with the way we think of dispositions. One plausible construal of Kantian virtue, moreover, sees virtue as a “moral strength of will” or a “morally good disposition” that is “freely acquired” (Baxley 2007, 298), which suggests that our assumptions may also apply to Kantian virtue (see also O’Neill 1983; Cureton and Hill 2014.). We therefore conclude that our findings may also inspire a response to situationist criticism marshalled against utilitarian and Kantian virtue.

What about “virtue-ethical” virtue? As we mentioned earlier, there are many varieties of virtue ethics in Western and other traditions of philosophy. While many contemporary virtue ethicists would consider Aristotle their predecessor (and some of them Aquinas), Confucius (Mower 2013; Slingerland 2011), Mencius (Van Norden 2007), the Stoics (Gill 2022), Hume (Merritt 2000; Slote 2001), and Nietzsche (Swanton 2003), among others, have also had their influence. The difference between these approaches is, however, not primarily concerned with the concept of virtue as such, but rather with such questions as how virtue relates to the good life (eudaemonia) or to agent’s motives, or the extent to which the moral status of an action depends on the agent’s virtue alone (or also on, for instance, flourishing). Hence the empirical support we provide applies to most of virtue ethics.

Let us briefly elaborate. Take eudaemonist versions of virtue ethics, first. Such versions see virtue as contributing to the good life (eudaemonia), but disagree about whether virtue is necessary and sufficient (as the Stoics thought), or necessary but not sufficient (as Aristotle thought, as for him the good life depends on external circumstances as well). As far as we can see, however, the position assumed in this debate is orthogonal to the question about how to represent the relation between situational pressure and virtuous behavior. The findings of our studies do not compel us to join either Aristotle or the Stoics, as they are compatible with both positions: both positions share the view that virtues are dispositions, and both positions emphasize the value of moral education and of acquiring virtue through practice.

Another type of virtue ethics is exemplified by Michael Slote (2001). According to Slote, what makes an action good (or what gives eudaemonia its value) ultimately depends on the respective agent’s motives. So where a eudaemonist explanation of the value of particular motivations and emotions prioritizes the contribution they make to the good life, agent-based versions of virtue theory have it the other way round: motivations come first.

Our findings are compatible with agent-based virtue ethics just as well. Clearly for agent-based virtue ethics virtues are dispositions. But can they be acquired? While perhaps Slote puts less emphasis on acquiring virtue, virtue ethicists such as Linda Zagzebski (2017) have developed elaborate accounts of how we acquire virtue through observing exemplars. Zagzebski argues that what explains how we acquire virtue’s motives is that we emulate people we admire: for if we admire someone, we are motivated not just to imitate their behavior,

but also their motives. All in all, this suggests that our findings offer support to agent-based virtue ethics too.

This is not true, however, of a third stream of virtue ethics. This approach, the target-centered approach due to Christine Swanton (2021), defines a specific virtue (e.g. courage) as a disposition to respond in a sufficiently good or excellent way to items in the “field” of the specific virtue, which in the case of courage are things that have to do with harm and danger. Virtues, according to Swanton, aim at particular “targets.” Courage, for instance, aims at the way we cope with harm and danger. Now according to Swanton’s approach, whether a certain course of action counts as virtuous cannot be entirely reduced to the question of whether it accords with one specific virtue only, because a person’s actions always take place in a situation characterized by various “fields,” which has the consequence that the various virtues corresponding with these “fields” may place mutually incompatible demands on the agent. Because of this reason, a target-centered virtue ethicist may have more fundamental objections to measuring virtuous behavior along the dimensions of one virtue only, as we do in our two studies. In our studies, we only consider courage. But under a target-based conception of virtue, what matters is rather what could be called *overall virtue*, and we readily acknowledge that that is not what our study has investigated. This limits the applicability of our results. In all fairness, it should be pointed out that this is a limitation we share with the situationist experiments.

To summarize the upshot of our discussion so far, we have first examined Kantian and utilitarian conceptions of virtue, and argued that (at least for some plausible views of Kantian and utilitarian virtue) our findings apply to these views. We then examined three common approaches to virtue ethics, and saw that our findings apply to the eudaemonist and the agent-based variety, but not to the target-centered variety.

Before turning to the conclusion, we would now like to say a few things in defense of our studies as compared to situationist experiments. We believe that there are various reasons why the setup of our experiments allows us to do justice to a number of essential characteristics of virtue that most virtue ethicists subscribe to, but which have been largely left out from situationist experiments.

We make three observations about these essential characteristics first, and then discuss why our studies are in a better position to examine them than situationist experiments.

First, in order to ascribe a virtue to a person, it is key for most virtue ethicists that the actions the person selects result from embracing a particular normative worldview that provides the person with reasons for action. An honest person, as Hursthouse (1999) argues, tells the truth not because of fear to be found out, but because they realize that lying would be dishonest. Their worldview, that is, leads to specific motivations for actions, and to specific emotional responses to honest and dishonest behavior in other people.

One consequence of this first observation is that virtues come in degrees (Athassoulis 2000): one’s motivations and emotional responses may be more or less in tune with virtue. Another consequence is that merely observing a few instances of “virtuous-looking” behavior is insufficient evidence to conclude that the person possesses virtue in any deeper sense (Sreenivasan 2008). That a person has not lied today does not give us any information about their motivations and emotions; it does not tell us that tomorrow they will not lie either.

Second, we must distinguish between virtue and continence. Going back to Aristotle, the thought that underlies the difference is that the fully virtuous undergo no influence in their

motivation from pulls that are contrary to virtuous action, whereas continent people experience such pulls but manage to control and overcome them.

Third, we must allow for the role of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). It is part of most conceptions of virtue that virtue is not only a disposition or plain tendency to act in a particular way. This is underscored by the fact that the term *natural virtue* is reserved to such “virtue-like” dispositions that may lead people to unreflectively act in a way that conforms with virtue. Unreflective courageous behavior, however, is no sign of virtue. What is missing is that virtue also requires the practical wisdom that helps people to see what is required of them in a specific situation. A person possessing practical wisdom has acquired the ability to spot the relevant elements of a situation, and to make adequate evaluation of their respective importance to moral action.

We believe that our experiments incorporate these three observations to a larger extent than the experiments that situationists typically quote. The data that most situationist experiment work with are observations of virtuous behavior (helping behavior, for instance, in the Good Samaritan experiment). As a result, the experimenters cannot distinguish between participants on the basis of, for instance, their emotional response to being confronted with the person in distress, or lack of continence. Whatever reasons a participant had to ignore the person in distress (and to make specific evaluations of the relevance of the various interests in the case at hand), the situationist experimenter will have to classify their behavior as lacking virtue. The virtue ethicist, by contrast, will want to make a distinction based on the reasons the person had to help or not to help.

Our studies involve surveys that, to some extent, allow us to examine the motivations and responses of participants. Participants provide first-order reports about their reasoning and their actions, and are asked to reflect on their motivations. So we get, to some extent, information that may help us to judge their continence and practical wisdom, and so we believe we do better than the situationists. We say “to some extent” lest we oversell our experiment, but we do believe that our approach is an improvement over situationist experiments in this regard, as the way we examine virtue brings us closer to studying something that virtue ethicists will recognize as genuine virtue.

5 Conclusion

Our aim in this paper was to introduce a representation of virtue ethics by means of a tilde-shaped curvilinear relation between situational pressure and virtuous behavior (rather than a linear relation), and to test this relation empirically. While the studies that we conducted provide evidence for virtue ethics, and against situationism, we wish to caution against overly radical conclusions, and therefore we indicate the limitations of the studies, and make some remarks about potential future research.

First, while we should of course never expect to find an empirical relation that precisely overlaps with the stylized postulated relation between situation and behavior, situationists might observe that if we compare the relevant graphs, the “flat” part we empirically find (Fig. 4) is smaller than what we postulate (Fig. 3). While our statistical analysis unequivocally shows that the cubic model with the “flat” part is better than the linear model, it remains to be seen indeed whether this observation can be generalized to other studies.

Second, we report two studies with participants with varying demographics, but within one industry. We believe that our setup provides greater relevant variation of participants within one experiment than many situationist experiments, but here, too, future research will have to determine whether our findings are generalizable. The fact that we have a sample considerably larger than what is common in psychology, plus the novelty of using standard methods drawn from empirical scholarship justifies our taking our results very seriously, though.

Third, it is possible to advocate a form of situationism and nonetheless allow for the possibility that many contexts offer exceptions to situationism; the situationist might then suspect that what we have found is perhaps one of these exceptions. This line of reasoning was proposed by Ross and Nisbett (1991), among others. We admit that our data cannot exclude the possibility that what we have found is exceptional in that sense, so it is worthwhile to replicate our work in different cultural and organizational contexts.

Fourth, we consider a particular rendering of a particular virtue only (courage). One reason why we focus on courage only is that this virtue has received more attention in the empirical literature than other virtues (see, e.g., Cameron and Winn 2012; Kidder 2005), which means that we can use survey items that have been thoroughly evaluated and corroborated. All the same, however, future studies should consider a wider range of virtues to see if our results replicate.

Fifth, our study partly addresses the worry that most psychological studies that situationists refer to involve one-shot, between-subjects experiments (Sreenivasan 2008). A problem with such studies is that when statistically significant differences between treatment and control group are established, it is generally illegitimate to conclude something about individual consistency across situations. The use of survey methodologies circumvents some of these problems. Our approach leads subjects to reflect on a wide range of behaviors in a wide range of contexts. It is important to note that our studies are not, however, full-dress within-subjects experiments.

To conclude, despite these acknowledged limitations and open issues, we believe that we have succeeded at least in directing attention to the relevance of the shape of the correlation between virtue and behavior. By invoking evidence from psychology, situationist philosophers forced the virtue ethicist into the defensive. However, these experiments did not take the shape of the correlation into account. We have shown that once we start doing that, the virtue ethicist's argumentative position changes. If our findings can be generalized, we will have contributed to an empirical argument in favor of virtue ethics.

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Declarations

Conflicts of Interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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