

## Philosophical Inquiry in Education

PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY IN EDUCATION  
The Journal of the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

# Taken Out of Context: Defending Civic Education From the Situationist Critique

Sigal Ben-Porath and Gideon Dishon

Volume 23, Number 1, 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070363ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070363ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Ben-Porath, S. & Dishon, G. (2015). Taken Out of Context: Defending Civic Education From the Situationist Critique. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 23(1), 22–37. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070363ar>

Article abstract

Situationists have suggested that educational efforts to improve character and instill virtues should be abandoned, as individuals' behavior is predicted by contexts and situations rather than by character traits. More recently it has been suggested that civic education and especially the effort to cultivate civic virtues are ineffective for similar reasons and should be replaced by the introduction of desirable social norms and institutions. After surveying the debate on this topic in the first part of the essay, we suggest that in fact virtues should not be judged as existing within one person and absent from another based on their behavior in a single instance. Rather, virtues should be understood as composite and probabilistic and therefore strengthening them is a valuable endeavor. In considering civic virtues specifically we argue that the social and public nature of their expression make schools excellent contexts for cultivating and practicing democratic civic virtues. Even the best institutional structures of a well-functioning democratic society rely on the compliance of virtuous citizens, and the situationist preference for desirable social norms is implicitly predicated on virtuous citizens to institute and follow those norms. Moreover, civic education in a democracy strives to cultivate more than compliance with norms of conduct. It aspires to nurture youth who see themselves as responsible to, and capable of shaping the norms of the society in which they live. We thus incorporate some of the insights from situationism into a revamped view of civic education.

# *Taken Out of Context: Defending Civic Education From the Situationist Critique*

---

SIGAL BEN-PORATH and GIDEON DISHON<sup>1</sup>

University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education

*Abstract: Situationists have suggested that educational efforts to improve character and instill virtues should be abandoned, as individuals' behavior is predicted by contexts and situations rather than by character traits. More recently it has been suggested that civic education and especially the effort to cultivate civic virtues are ineffective for similar reasons and should be replaced by the introduction of desirable social norms and institutions. After surveying the debate on this topic in the first part of the essay, we suggest that in fact virtues should not be judged as existing within one person and absent from another based on their behavior in a single instance. Rather, virtues should be understood as composite and probabilistic and therefore strengthening them is a valuable endeavor. In considering civic virtues specifically we argue that the social and public nature of their expression make schools excellent contexts for cultivating and practicing democratic civic virtues. Even the best institutional structures of a well-functioning democratic society rely on the compliance of virtuous citizens, and the situationist preference for desirable social norms is implicitly predicated on virtuous citizens to institute and follow those norms. Moreover, civic education in a democracy strives to cultivate more than compliance with norms of conduct. It aspires to nurture youth who see themselves as responsible to, and capable of shaping the norms of, the society in which they live. We thus incorporate some of the insights from situationism into a revamped view of civic education.*

## **Introduction**

One of the central aims of civic education<sup>2</sup> is to “help young people acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives” (Carnegie Corporation of New York & the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE], 2003, p. 4). Implicit in this goal is the belief that students will be able to transfer the civic skills and attitudes they acquire in educational settings to other contexts. Yet the situationist critique of virtue ethics has challenged the feasibility of such an endeavor (Doris, 2002, Harman 1999; Merritt, Doris & Harman, 2010). Situationists argue that empirical evidence from social psychology illustrates how human conduct is mainly determined by situational factors, rather than individual character traits or virtues. Recently, this critique has been expanded to challenge the role of civic virtues: arguing that they lack the empirical support to substantiate their instrumental role in promoting liberal patterns of conduct (McTernan, 2014).

---

<sup>1</sup> Authors are listed in alphabetical order.

<sup>2</sup> The term “civic education” is often associated with the traditional knowledge-centered curriculum. For this reason, many researchers use the terms “citizenship education” or “education for citizenship” when describing contemporary interest in a more holistic approach (Ben-Porath, 2012). However, as the virtues cultivated in this endeavor are commonly referred to as “civic virtues,” for the sake of clarity we will use the term “civic education” throughout this paper.

Our aim in this paper is to respond to the situationist challenge to education for civic virtues, while at the same time exploring how situationism might inform a more nuanced understanding of the potential and limitations of civic education. We begin with the current state of the debate on situationism and virtue.

## Situationism

Situationism<sup>3</sup> is marked by skepticism towards Aristotelian virtue ethics and the common psychological assumption of constancy of individual conduct across settings driven by robust personal traits. Situationists argue that empirical evidence from social psychology challenges the centrality of virtue to individual conduct:

The situationist argument that needs to be taken seriously ... holds that the Aristotelian conception of traits as robust dispositions—the sort which lead to trait-relevant behavior across a wide variety of trait-relevant situations—is radically empirically undersupported. (Doris & Stich, 2005, p. 119)

Much of the academic debate concerning situationism is focused on whether Doris and other situationists are truly criticizing the “Aristotelian conception of traits as robust dispositions” or their own strawman version of virtue ethics (Annas, 2005). While we will explore some of these critiques later on, at this stage it is worth exploring more carefully how situationists perceive traits, as this definition sets up the aspects they critique. Doris offers a concise and foundational formulation of the situationist perception of traits:

[A] person [who] has a robust trait can confidently be expected to display trait-relevant behavior across a wide variety of trait-relevant situations, even where some or all of these situations are not optimally conducive to such behavior. (Doris, 2002, p. 18)

Doris identifies the two central characteristics of traits (or virtues) which he will later turn to criticize: traits must be *consistent* across contexts—“confidently be expected to display trait-relevant behavior across a wide variety of trait-relevant situations”—and they must be *robust*, “even where some or all of these situations are not optimally conducive to such behavior.” Accordingly, situationists challenge these two attributes of virtues and argue that they in fact are *inconsistent* and *frail*, and thus cannot be considered as consistent or robust traits (Adams, 2006, p. 120). Let us look at these two points of criticism in turn.

## Inconsistency

The first experimental evidence concerning the inconsistency of conduct across varying contexts was Hartshorne and May’s (1930) “Character Education Inquiry.” Examining over 8,000 schoolchildren across various contexts (lying in order to defend a friend, cheating on a test, stealing loose change left on a table), Hartshorne and May found that participants exhibited a very limited level of consistency (.23) in their conduct across contexts. Consistency in behavior depended on similarity in contexts; copying from an answer key in two different tests had a much stronger correlation than the correlation among other forms of test cheating, such as continuing to work after the designated time is over (Doris, 2002). The lack of consistency in

---

<sup>3</sup> We do not aim to offer a thorough presentation of the situationist debate, but rather focus on aspects of this debate that are relevant to the context of civic education. We do nonetheless refer to the breadth of the debate in some of what follows. For some critiques of situationism, see: Adams, 2006; Annas, 2005; Kristjánsson, 2008; Badhwar, 1996; Kamtekar, 2004; Webber, 2013.

individual conduct was famously asserted in Mischel's (1968) meta-analysis of personality psychology: Mischel examined research in personality psychology and found that character traits turn out to be statistically weak predictors of conduct (with correlations between .1 and .2).

Situationists do not contend that this empirical data challenges the existence of character traits, but rather that, in contradiction to the virtue ethics approach, these traits are situation-specific rather than universal and do not support predictions of behavior across varying situations (Merritt et. al, 2010). Hence, for instance, instead of perceiving courage as a cross-situational and stable personal attribute, a person can be described as courageous in the battlefield—physical courage—but may not have the courage to oppose common opinion or authority—moral courage (Adams, 2006). Doris (2002) takes this position to an extreme and argues that forms of behavior show consistency only across very specific situations such as “sailing-in-rough-weather-with-one's-friends-courageous” (p. 115).

## Frailty

The situationist claim that virtue is frail entails that it is extraneous factors that best predict and most significantly influence that person's behavior in a given situation. The *frailty* of virtue is exhibited in a set of well-known experiments in social psychology, which illustrate that the central determinants of conduct are often seemingly irrelevant and morally neutral situational factors. Some of these are particularly relevant to the civic sphere: Darley and Latane (1968) demonstrated that an increase in the number of bystanders inhibits participants' helping behavior (“the bystander effect”); in the Good Samaritan experiment, Darley and Batson (1973) exposed how moral conduct is sensitive to trivial factors such as being in a hurry by manipulating students' sense of being late to give a talk and thus affecting their willingness to help a stranger in need; perhaps most famously, Milgram's (1963) experiments on obedience revealed the influence authority has over conduct even in seemingly clear-cut moral situations.

Hence, situationism posits two ways in which conduct is actually driven by situational factors; the frailty of virtue is based on a more modest claim—that even if virtues exist, they are not strong enough to determine behavior in situations that are not conducive to such behavior. The inconsistency of virtue sets forth a more foundational assertion: even in predictable circumstances, situational factors are better predictors of individual conduct and hence should be the basis for predicting, analyzing and influencing such conduct.

## Situationism and Civic Education

What are the implications of this attempted rebuttal of virtue ethics for the realm of education? If stable character traits are not important factors in determining behavior then there is obviously no point in investing time, effort and money in fostering them; as Doris and Stich (2005) suggest, “programs of moral education aimed at inculcating virtues may very well be futile” (p. 120). Moreover, Harman (1999) argues that humans acquire morality in similar fashion to learning their native tongue: by naturally functioning in their social environment. Consequently, intentional moral or character education is deemed futile. Instead the focus should shift to designing beneficial social policies and institutions:

[T]he very natural human tendency to think in terms of character traits leads us in the wrong direction. To the extent that we are interested in improving the lot of mankind it is better to put less emphasis on moral

education and on building character and more emphasis on trying to arrange social institutions so that human beings are not placed in situations in which they will act badly. (Harman, 2009, p. 241)<sup>4</sup>

To the extent that civic education is based on an effort to cultivate civic virtues, the situationist critique seems to be equally relevant.<sup>5</sup> If personal character traits related to citizenship are weak predictors of civic behavior, Harman's conclusion would seem to follow—it is not reasonable to invest time and effort in shaping future citizens through civic education. As Emily McTernan (2014) argues:

[L]iberal virtue faces an attack: it is, empirically, a poor candidate for the instrumental roles it was intended to fulfil. Situationism's lesson is that individual traits like virtues fail to be a reliable way to secure stable patterns of cross-situationally consistent behaviour, if they exist at all. (p. 89)<sup>6</sup>

Thus, for some situationists, as well as for those advocating for the institution of “nudges” and other social structures that encourage better behavior by individuals, it is more effective to invest efforts in designing such structures than in focusing on the less productive effort to educate individuals for civic virtue. We agree that experiments such as those described above seem pertinent to the challenges characteristic of the civic sphere. The bystander inhibition experiment should at least raise some questions about the extent to which public action is related to (innate or learnt) virtues as distinct from circumstantial conditions, including seemingly innocuous ones such as the number of people around; the Good Samaritan experiment exposes how trivial personal needs (being in a hurry) can undermine work for, and commitment to, the greater good; and the Milgram experiments challenge (among other things) the feasibility of citizens resisting the authority of governments and other officials. Moreover, one of the central challenges to a virtue-based understanding of civic action is that citizens are expected to act in contexts in which they inherently have little control. By contrast to moral virtues which might be practiced in everyday contexts more limited in scope (the family, the workplace), in the public sphere citizens are commonly thrust into situations in which they are passive and subject to strong social norms.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, civic participation can be seen as a real-life equivalent of the experimental literature cited above, only this time it is political actors and institutions, instead of social psychologists, which orchestrate the situational cues.

Contrary to this critique, the view that character virtues are a key aspect of civic behavior is strengthened due to the tendency of civic struggles to be etched into the collective imagination through iconoclasts who fought against injustice: Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on the bus, or a single protester standing in front of a column of tanks in Tiananmen Square. We tend to assume that these and other individuals who perform exemplary civic acts are not merely caught in the moment but rather present to us the “content of their character”—their true commitments and abilities as civic actors. We assume, for example, that Rosa Parks would have acted the same way independent of whether there were two or twenty other riders on the bus. Can this view be salvaged from the situationist critique, allowing us to explain such

---

<sup>4</sup> In other works, Doris and others offer a more nuanced perception of the role of education, on which we will elaborate later.

<sup>5</sup> Civic education is commonly seen as focused on the development of knowledge, skills and dispositions related to civic behavior (Carnegie Corporation of New York & CIRCLE, 2003, p. 4). The focus in this paper is the third dimension—alternately described as dispositions, attitudes, habits of heart or virtues. While there are some valid distinctions among these, for the purpose of our discussion we focus on virtues as they seem to denote a historical and philosophical account that encompasses the other terms as well. We believe that our discussion is similarly relevant to those other terms.

<sup>6</sup> McTernan's critique is symptomatic of a larger trend of viewing social planning as a more efficient alternative to education. For example: Thaler and Sunstein, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> We wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for this journal for pointing out this distinction.

acts of individual courage as related to personal virtue? More broadly, what is the best way to understand and thus to encourage positive civic action in light of the reasonable suggestion that some situational factors may affect the way individuals behave in (civic and other) contexts?

In what follows we attempt to defend civic education practice from its situationist critics, while nonetheless recognizing the strength of some of the situationist concerns overall as well as in this particular realm of education. We start by assessing the situationist critique as it relates to virtue more broadly, offering to replace Doris' presentation of virtue with a probabilistic, modular and composite model. We then proceed to offer a modified definition of civic virtues attuned to a more nuanced understanding of virtue. Finally, we examine the promise and limitations of cultivating such civic virtues through education.

## Virtue Reassessed

Applying the situationist critique to civic education depends on two central assumptions regarding the characteristics of virtue, implied by situationism's reliance on the experimental literature in social psychology and deriving from the critiques concerning the inconsistency and frailty of virtue. To accept the frailty critique one needs to accept the assumption—which we will next criticize—that virtues can be measured according to conduct in a single experimental observation. Following that we will consider, and reject, the presupposition on which the inconsistency assumption relies, namely, that virtues by their very nature ought to trump context. These are obviously not the only implicit assumptions that form the basis to the situationist critique. Their importance and the reason we focus on them is that these particular two assumptions are specifically relevant to the discussion of *civic* virtues, and therefore undermining them would allow us to defend both civic virtues and subsequently the practice of civic education.

### Assumption I: Virtues Can Be Measured According to Conduct in a Single Incident

The first situationist assumption concerning virtue that we focus on is that it can be meaningfully measured according to conduct in a single occurrence. The majority of the experiments suggesting the frailty of virtue rely on a “one-shot” manipulation of participants' conduct. Thus, for example, there is no longitudinal or cross-context data on participants in Milgram's (1963) experiments. However, situationists claim that these experiments are diagnostic: the fact that such a large proportion of participants were willing to commit acts starkly contrasted to our perception of moral conduct sheds light on what is argued to be the general inclination of conduct to be determined by situational factors; in Milgram's case obeying authority even when that entails undermining their own values (Doris, 2010).

This assumption is in fact based on two pre-suppositions: that behavior is a sufficient measure for the existence of virtue, and that this measurement can be carried out in single occurrence. Both of these suppositions are misleading, as they rely on a narrow understating of virtues in terms of behavioral responses: perceiving character traits as dispositions to perform certain types of behaviors, the presence of which is evidence of the existence of the corresponding trait (or virtue). An honest person is one who is witnessed performing “honest” behaviors—telling the truth, not cheating and so on (Annas, 2005; Kamtekar, 2004). However, virtues cover a larger ethical ground than actors' responses to situational stimuli; one that includes such factors as beliefs, thoughts, emotions and motivations. One can consistently act in honest ways because of external pressures or utilitarian considerations; this still would not seem to qualify as a virtue (Adams, 2006). This emphasis on behavioral responses severely limits the virtues situationism accounts for. Many virtues cannot be understood as a response to situational stimuli: circumspection and recklessness relate to

the extent to which one takes situational characteristics into account, whereas adventurousness and timidity relate to the type of situations one aims to experience (Webber, 2013).

Second, it is not only that situationism focuses on behavioral responses to stimuli; it does so under the assumption that the unethical conduct exhibited in a single experiment is sufficient to disqualify its exhibitor from holding a specific virtue, and by implication casts shadow on the notion of virtue. Even beyond the fact that the experiments are often based on contrived and sometimes unrealistic circumstances, single responses to stimuli tell us less about the acting agent's virtues than situationists argue. There is a growing body of empirical evidence showing that while individual conduct in a single occasion is very hard to predict, traits can help us identify an average of behavior over a large number of observations (Fleeson, 2004). To illustrate, Sabini and Silver (2005) draw a sport analogy: the difference in batting average in baseball between a skilled and a poor batter is often less than .2 (e.g. .350 compared to .180). Looking at these statistics, we would not venture to predict whether either of the players would hit a given pitch; however, we could assess one player's batting ability as substantially better than the other's overall. This statistical difference is similar to those considered meaningless by situationists in the context of virtues. Character traits manifest not according to conduct in a single contrived occurrence, but rather as an average of behavior, or a distribution of responses (Ross & Nisbett, 2011; Fleeson, 2001). Virtues cannot predict conduct in a given situation; rather, they can offer evaluation of the likeliness of any behavior over a large number of instances. We cannot say whether Jane, who is considered honest, will act honestly in any of the situations presented in the Hartshorne and May (1930) experiment, but we could argue that over a large number of observations she would be more likely to act honestly than Mary, who is not as honest as Jane. Accordingly, virtues ought to be understood in probabilistic terms: they do not allow us to predict with certainty how individuals will behave, but they might allow us to assign probabilities to certain modes of conduct (Adams, 2006; Fleeson, 2004). Therefore, although virtues might be frail or subject to certain situational manipulations, this does not undermine their importance and utility as long-term determinants and predictors of conduct.

## **Assumption II: Virtues Ought to Trump Context**

In the previous section, we argued that civic virtues ought to be viewed as dispositions that tend to be expressed as an average of varying behaviors over time. While this might provide a response to the assumption regarding the frailty of virtue, inconsistency raises a graver challenge for civic education as it questions the feasibility of education for conduct in general. If conduct is mainly determined by situational cues, it might be futile to invest in shaping students' conduct through education, as the behavioral patterns exhibited in educational contexts will remain exclusive to the context in which they are nurtured. Put differently, the frailty critique relates to the robustness of virtue which we could aspire to cultivate, while the inconsistency of virtue challenges education for virtues in principle. As the literature on learning has shown, transference of any learnt subject matter is always complex and partial (Bransford & Schwartz, 1999; Day & Goldstone, 2012).

However, acknowledging the inconsistency of conduct need not lead to the disqualification of virtue as a reasonable aim of civic education. Instead, we adopt Badhwar's (1996) "compartmentalized" perception of virtue according to which virtue develops in domains that reflect personal tendencies and habituation processes of specific individuals. This compartmentalization is compatible with human skills in other areas of life: individuals do not excel in all possible pursuits, or even in all aspects of a given pursuit. We are not surprised that a "child who is good at remembering the names of books and writers is not necessarily good at remembering the names of movies or actors" (Badhwar, 2009, p. 270). We contend that the situationist critique of virtue relies on a false dichotomy between global virtues, as per the Aristotelian position, and a

very limited and situated understanding of virtues as Doris (2002) presents them. Instead, virtues are located on a spectrum from more to less local. Similarly trying to avoid this dichotomy, Adams (2006) offers to view virtue as modular and composite, or in other words as apparent in different areas which might interact and lead to the development of more general (though still not global) virtues:

Behavioral modules of a single virtue will be dispositions whose behavioral manifestation is similar (being characteristic of the single virtue), but specific to different domains of behavior, and acquired separately. And combining them is to yield a more general, and more consistent, disposition to behave in the relevant way in a wide variety of situations. (pp. 126-7)

Therefore, it should not be surprising that students in the Hartshorne and May experiments exhibited varying levels of honesty when cheating on a test or lying in order to help a peer avoid punishment. As these two situations vary widely in terms of the ends of cheating, the expected sanctions (both for cheating and not cheating), the action pursued and so on, it is plausible to assume that conduct might vary accordingly. As mentioned above, Doris has been criticized for his overly global interpretation of virtue, highlighting the fact that Aristotelian virtue is mediated through the individual development of *phronesis*—the practical wisdom to apply conflicting virtues to a variety of complex situations (Annas, 2005; Kristjánsson, 2008). However, the importance of a modular and composite perception of virtue is that it explains consistency as existing along a spectrum rather than as a dichotomy.

This is an important aspect of the defense of civic education from its situationist critics. The extent of the modularity of virtues may vary across persons and traits, but the claim remains that virtue can be cultivated and practiced in ways that allow for it to be expressed more regularly, namely, can move further along the spectrum. This in turn, shifts the debate from questions concerning the existence of virtues to a more practical one focused on exploring the conditions under which certain modular virtues can be developed and expanded through composition. Therefore, the modularity of virtue need not refute the project of civic education as a whole, as is sometimes claimed by situationists, but rather may lead to a more humble yet practical approach to the cultivation of virtues.

### **Civic Virtues Defined and Illustrated**

If we are correct to assume that virtues are modular, composite and probabilistic, then virtues should not be measured solely in terms of specific expressed behavior but rather as individuals' dispositions for conduct. At the very least, even if there are research-related reasons to measure virtues in a single occurrence, it should be made clear that these measurements are only a partial representation of virtuous conduct. To fully account for virtues, and especially for the purpose of educational practice, their manifestation over time and in more realistic (as well as mundane) contexts needs to be examined. Long-term efforts such as civic education provide contexts for intervention that are informed only in a very limited way by the localized measurements of expressed virtues in a manipulated single occurrence.

Accordingly, *civic virtues* are to be understood as stable inclinations to think and act well toward and with others in advancement of publicly justifiable and shared goals, as well as to hold morally desirable feelings and beliefs toward others and the context and actions shared with them. They are the strengths that allow each individual to understand her own interests, preferences and perspectives; to relate them to external, shared and publicly-minded projects; to develop a voice that would let her express them; and to have



the stable motivation, and other skills and attitudes, such as respect for others, communicative abilities and open-mindedness, that allow her to try to promote her perspective in a public context.

These dispositions can anticipate civic behavior to some extent, and are probably better predictors than specific previous acts. Acts and behaviors can be coincidental, passing or motivated by localized attitudes or circumstances, as situationism has taught us. Virtues, understood as stable dispositions to feel, believe and think in certain ways, are more promising as predictors of future behavior, as well as being sounder as explanatory factors for generally consistent behavior over time.

In the civic realm, full consistency is not often to be expected, and may not even be virtuous in and of itself. Even the paradigmatic case of civic behavior, namely voting, is inconsistent across time. While some citizens consistently act the same way in this domain—in other words, they vote in all elections open to them, or they never vote—fluctuation in voting patterns indicate that for the majority of citizens the decision to vote is dependent on a variety of factors beyond the mere opportunity to fulfill their civic duty.

It could be thought that this common phenomenon of the sometime-voter substantiates the situationist critique. It seems to us that it can at least as readily attest to the differing levels, or strengths, of civic virtues in the public. If one is strongly disposed to express her political views, one might always hold a relevant opinion, and always make sure to find the time to vote. However, for many citizens their sense of civic duty as related to elections, and the concomitant civic virtues that underlie their inclination to vote, are not as stellar. They may be interested in voting but too busy or distracted, or committed to other actions—perhaps even other virtuous actions—that day (in places where Election Day is still a meaningful phrase, and early or absentee voting is not the norm). They may be unsuccessful in acquiring the knowledge needed to make a decision in certain elections. They may find all candidates in a given election unsatisfying. Expressed more broadly, civic behaviors (such as voting) are based on dispositions that should not be understood as pointing at unified and consistent virtues that are stable across all contexts, but rather be understood as expressing probabilistic civic virtues.

## Educating for Civic Virtue

The question that motivates this paper is whether in light of the situationist critique the development of virtues can still be seen as an effective and realistic goal of civic education. Situationists would rather that educators avoid the doomed effort to teach virtues, and that instead society invest in strengthening desirable social norms and creating institutions and policies that would encourage virtuous behaviors. An examination of McTernan's (2014) endorsement of social norms as a more empirically-grounded alternative to civic education can illustrate this point, and in particular, a closer look at the examples she offers exposes how the social norms she recommends presuppose the existence of civic virtues. For instance, "[i]nforming hotel guests that reusing towels 'helps save the environment,' and that most fellow guests did so, increased the number of guests who reused their towels." However, the effectiveness of this practice relies on an established disposition to care about the environment, without which the signaling of the existence of a social norm is futile. As McTernan herself states, "those conservatives who seemingly rejected the environmental norm did not decrease their energy use in line with the majority" (pp. 95-96). This sense of responsibility towards public goods, in this case the environment, is squarely within the aims of civic education.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, even well-structured institutions require an inclination by citizens to learn about them and to participate in

---

<sup>8</sup> McTernan presents a second type of norms, which she claims do not rely on established dispositions. We will later elaborate on why these norms still necessitate civic education.

them. In other words, in the civic sphere the functioning of a given norm or an institution relies on a certain level of established personal disposition to comply with the norm. Without this disposition, such norms or institutions are rendered ineffectual. This is the case in the civic context even more than in other contexts in which such disposition is developed—such as the family, places of worship and other voluntary associations—specifically because actors in the civic sphere have less control over the situation than in most domains in which moral action is required, and are often guided by entrenched norms concerning political participation ,

Neither norms nor virtues are guaranteed to bring all individuals to make the right choice all the time (even in cases where such “right choice” is readily noted). Whole industries are devoted to identifying and exploiting our weak will, our fallibility, our humanity. As studies in fields from behavior economics to marketing have indicated, humans are susceptible to manipulation in various decisions, from shopping choices to food preferences to health care decisions. However, the fact that all are vulnerable to such influences does not mean that education is redundant but rather that it should take such human weaknesses into account and aim to counter them as needed. The role of education is to teach children how to develop the needed strengths, including virtues, to overcome some of our human weaknesses and to express our better nature. In the public and civic domain it also should teach us how to manage the variety of circumstances, including manipulations, which might otherwise limit our ability to express our virtues.

One lesson we can clearly learn from the situationist critique is that it is important to construct the public sphere in a way that would encourage positive civic behavior. Some of these structures have to do with technical aspects that support civic behavior. To encourage voting, a society can create the conditions that make the decision to vote less onerous (through early voting, secure online voting and other measures). To encourage collective action, a community can create spaces where members can come together in inviting and engaging contexts. Laws protecting civic action are part of these conditions but they do not suffice for encouraging civic behavior, and communities should be supported in creating the necessary spaces for their members to share ideas and commit to acting. These legal and communal contexts would provide the conditions for individuals to act collectively for the public good, but they are most likely to take advantage of these conditions if they have had the opportunity to develop the relevant virtues and dispositions. This is where the importance of civic education becomes apparent.

The question is then not whether situations or persons drive behavior, but rather how the two interact. To encourage citizens to vote, social structures and social norms related to voting are useful, along with the effort to teach young people of the importance of participation and to cultivate in them the civic capacities and tendencies that would make them more likely to stay abreast of political information and be inclined to participate. Therefore, while situational factors can influence individuals to act according to their dispositions such as engagement or helpfulness, they are meaningless if one is not disposed for such action (Callan, 2015). Before we can account for the implicit drivers of behavior, civic education must create the basis of explicit civic virtues—generate and strengthen the disposition individuals have to consider the public good and to act in concert with others toward shared public aims.

### **Beyond Inconsistency: Educational Contexts as Public Spaces**

Civic virtues encompass a variety of dispositions and are expressed through a broad range of behaviors such as voting, consuming news through various venues, campaigning and organizing neighborhood activities, or protesting and otherwise publicly expressing opinion on public matters. They present a unique case of virtues because they are explicitly tied to working in concert with others to advance shared aims, and therefore even more than other virtues cannot be understood or practiced outside of given social and institutional contexts.

The situationist claim that virtues are inconsistently expressed across contexts (such that my courage is never to be generalized beyond my “courage when sailing with friends” context) is thus a significant challenge to those who aim to defend civic virtues. It also presents an opportunity to better understand, and better structure, programs of civic education.

As mentioned, the public nature of civic action might render civic virtues even more vulnerable to the situationist critique: as actors are expected to exhibit these virtues in institutional contexts on which they have little influence, it might be argued that they are more likely to be influenced by situational cues. However, the more clearly defined scope of the expression of civic virtues—focused on action in public spaces—can be viewed as an opportunity from an educational perspective. The limited nature of cross-context consistency acknowledged by a modular perception of virtue implies that civic virtues ought to be acquired in a context as similar as possible to the context in which they are intended to be practiced. Thus, if civic virtues are defined as dispositions and capacities towards participation in public spaces, educational contexts should be similarly structured as public spaces that afford students opportunities for civic participation (Dewey, 1897). As mentioned, Harman (1999) claims that morality is acquired like a native tongue—as part of a natural process of social association. In contemporary Western liberal democracies, educational contexts—most often schools—are usually the first and most central public space and institution which children encounter (Levinson, 1999). Therefore, it follows that children naturally acquire their public modes of conduct in these contexts, regardless of educators’ intentions (Levinson, 2012). Thus, although families remain by far the most influential determinants of moral conduct (Lareau, 2011), educational settings play a pivotal role in shaping those aspects of behavior which are particularly civic and public. For this reason, it is imperative that these environments be shaped in light of the civic aims of education—structuring these spaces as shared endeavors towards the public good.<sup>9</sup>

The idea of educational contexts as public spaces that cultivate participatory habits and other civic virtues provides a response to a key dimension of situationism. In essence, the situationist critique that points at the context-dependence and thus inconsistency of virtue should encourage educators to offer civic experiences as a key aspect of preparing students for civic participation.<sup>10</sup> By offering experiential, varied and practical exposure and practice in civic behavior, schools can prepare students to express themselves positively as civic actors. Clearly, there are various differences between educational contexts and civic spaces, and hence it could be argued that cross-context behavioral consistency is questionable even if civic education were to be taught in a more experiential way. However, we suggest that greater consistency can be achieved, though it would not rely solely on the internal and ingrained character developed in children, but rather on constant relationships, roles and expectations they encounter through their years of schooling.

While situationists challenge the constancy of character, they do recognize social relations and social roles as sources of behavioral stability. In other words, it is the social context that we inhabit and the expectations set for us as part of this social context that provide a significant practicing field for developing virtues. As Merritt, Doris and Harman (2010) state:

With respect to many morally important response tendencies, the behavioral consistency that people may achieve is often due to their inhabiting climates of social expectation that elicit and support the consistency in question.... [B]ehavioral consistency sustained in this manner can be motivationally deep, relatively enduring, and responsive to reasons, along the lines celebrated in virtue ethics.... [O]ver time, the cumulative effect of maintaining your interpersonal relationships or fulfilling your social role is

<sup>9</sup> Civic considerations are obviously not the sole factor guiding the design of educational settings, yet they should carry more weight than they currently do.

<sup>10</sup> This is also the problem with progressive forms of education which, despite nurturing active participation, do not bear resemblance to the contested and heterogeneous public sphere of liberal democracies.

formative: it helps to sustain consistent response tendencies, some of them morally important, in your cognition and behavior. (p. 389)

The importance of “inhabiting climates of social expectation” should not lead to the rejection of civic virtues; on the contrary, it should allow us to appreciate the potential of educational settings to nurture modes of civic conduct which are “motivationally deep, relatively enduring, and responsive to reasons.” In this respect, we understand situationism not as a refutation of virtue, but rather as an abettor in better understanding the nature of virtues and the possible contexts in which they can be cultivated.

The question is then how to shape contexts which offer the desired forms of participation and beneficial social expectations, rather than how to impart civic virtues as personal, ingrained and unchanging character traits.<sup>11</sup> We argue that schools can and should nurture a *constancy of situations conducive to citizenship*: offering students active roles in a heterogeneous social context which is broadly based on principles of democratic participation. The pivotal importance of the consistency of civic situations, together with the composite nature of virtue, entails that civic experiences cannot be confined to tailored classes in civics, student government opportunities or any localized initiative, no matter how effective it is, and must characterize the schooling experience more broadly, nurtured across as large a number of settings as possible (Ben-Porath, 2012; Levinson, 2012). Else, any conduct nurtured might remain exclusive to a single context (e.g. being active only in the school government). Hence, it is imperative that schools and other educational contexts be structured in light of the civic aims of education—heterogeneous public spaces which offer students opportunities for practicing political participation with shared public aims.

### **Beyond Frailty: Citizens as Shapers of Civic Contexts**

Earlier, we discussed McTernan’s (2014) alternative proposition of social norms, and argued that virtues and norms are complementary rather than oppositional. However, as McTernan points out, not all norms rely on pre-existing dispositions for their realization: some social norms spring up independent of earlier dispositions, sometimes as a result of external interests such as in the case of advertising which “often attempts to create social norms, regarding say the ‘coolness’ of drinking beer” (p. 97). This type of norm is particularly important in the civic sphere which is commonly determined according to broad and relatively stable norms governing proper public behavior (Bicchieri, 2006). Due to their public nature, civic norms are more resistant to change by individual actors, and hence more aligned with the situationist critique. Still, there are two main reasons we believe that these types of norms do not undermine the vitality of civic education.

First, this critique is weakened by its reliance on a mutually exclusive depiction of persons and situations. Situationists argue that experiments in social psychology reveal the extent to which conduct is driven by situational factors. The overwhelming influence of the situation is then assumed to disqualify the role of individual character as the source of conduct. Subsequently, the educational attempt to cultivate desirable traits and dispositions is rejected as futile. However, this view is based on a false dichotomy between persons and situations (Funder, 2006; Swann & Seyle, 2005). Social psychologists have long abandoned the binary view of persons and situations, and instead focus on the *interaction* between individuals and the situations they are in (Fleeson & Nofle, 2009).<sup>12</sup> One of the central determinants of the interaction between persons and situations, which situationists tend to overlook, is the manner in which individuals invariably

<sup>11</sup> The depiction of citizenship as a social role can also be understood in contrast to the perception of citizenship as identity, yet this is beyond the scope of this paper. See Ben-Porath, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Doris (2002) acknowledges this state of affairs; nevertheless, his work stresses the relative importance of person versus situation rather than their reciprocal interaction.

shape situations in which they take part. This tendency goes undetected in experimental settings which are intentionally designed to prevent the continuities created by “the cumulative or aggregated effects of the person’s active choices and the social environment’s response to that person’s behavior and reputation” (Ross & Nesbitt, 2011, pp. 150-151). In more realistic contexts, individuals influence the settings in which they participate, shape them by their presence, and act according to perceived expectations.

Stemming from this mutual relationship of persons and situations is the idea of schools as cultivating *audience-induced consistency and predictability*: students must be treated as capable, influential and responsible members of their educational settings. While their roles should be age-appropriate, it is important to create the expectation both that students are responsible for public settings in which they participate and perceive themselves as actors able to shape these settings. These characteristics are intended to increase the likelihood of students choosing and creating situations in the future which are oriented towards responsible and active participation in public and political spaces. Acknowledging the importance of situational factors should not entail overlooking the influence individuals still have over shaping these situations. It is true that when compared to moral virtues, civic virtues are more easily determined by social cues due to the public nature of civic action. Yet this should not lead to abandoning the cultivation of civic virtues. On the contrary, it highlights the importance of nurturing children who see themselves as responsible and capable civic actors, in their schools and later in broader civic contexts. Civic education is then pursued in an attempt to ensure that children make the best use of their influence over social situations they encounter throughout their lives, and that they influence them in a direction that is at least in part publicly-minded.

The second reason the existence of strong social norms in the civic sphere does not undermine the importance of civic education is related to the unique roles of citizens in a liberal democracy. Putting aside the normative debate on paternalism and its role in shaping personal preferences,<sup>13</sup> the possible influence of artificial or manipulative norms (such as those advanced by business interests through advertising) does not diminish the necessity for civic education in democratic regimes but rather does the opposite. Future citizens in a democracy cannot be viewed as merely compliant but must also be seen as active and critical participants in setting the norms and deciding on the desired values of the community and the state, and in shaping the public and civic context in which they function as citizens (Brighouse, 1998). Civic education is not centered solely on promoting compliance to liberal democratic norms; it also aims to cultivate the capacities required for norm negotiating and setting, as well as the capacities to generate and shape the context in which these norms are negotiated and practiced.

Situationism’s focus on behavioral reactions to situational stimuli obfuscates a crucial component of civic education: cultivating the capacity to actively and incrementally contribute to everyday contexts over time, especially in collaboration with others. Civic education is not limited to nurturing the proper response patterns; rather, one of its central goals is to nurture individuals who are meaningfully tied to the context (specifically the political context) in which they live, and feel responsible for, and capable of, shaping it.<sup>14</sup> This context includes a set of democratic values to which citizens are committed—though fighting for those, or protecting them, while crucial in certain instances is not the main action expected and is thus not the main aspect of civic education.

Thus, although situationism exposes the limitations of civic virtues as predictors of behavior and the need to complement them with other means, civic education still remains the core building block of any attempt to nurture liberal citizenry in a democratic society. Absent virtues such as loyalty, tolerance, respect,

<sup>13</sup> For an inquiry into possible justifications for paternalism, see Ben-Porath and Sigal’s *Tough Choices: Structured Paternalism and the Landscape of Choice* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the assignment of responsibility was the factor most strongly related to ethical action in the Milgram experiments (Adams, 2006, p. 150).

helpfulness or engagement, even the best policies and institutions would become either ineffective or coercive. For social institutions, policies or norms to be effective, the individuals who use, relate to and inhabit them should possess at least a minimal level of civic virtues. Liberal democracies must rely on civic education to instill such virtues.

## Conclusion

While situationism offers important insights regarding the diverse and unexpected ways in which situational cues drive behavior, many of which are important to the civic sphere, the situationist critique should not be seen as rebutting the need for civic education or the hope for developing civic virtues through instituting effective civic educational practices. The rationale for cultivating virtue through intentional educational efforts, and specifically the rationale for cultivating civic virtues, does not disintegrate in the face of the situationist critique. Rather, a careful integration of some of the important insights gained from situationism can allow us, as we argued here, to clarify and target efforts to develop civic virtues through education. Understanding that virtues are probabilistic and composite means that cultivating them is a valuable effort for societies that rely on individuals' inclinations and choices for maintaining public order and promoting shared goals. Still, it is important to keep in mind that, since virtues are probabilistic and composite phenomena, even virtuous individuals are susceptible to influences by the context in which they are expected to make good choices.

Insofar as civic virtues, as we discuss them here, are attitudes that are expressed within a political context and, while stable, still have a variety of justified expressions, they reside somewhere in between the realm of action and the domain of personality traits. Metaphorically speaking they are not as deep or central to one's core identity as personality traits are, but they are less flitting than the situationist critique would have us assume. Because of their relative stability across contexts they require some time and effort to cultivate but they are more amenable to such cultivation, and can more justifiably be promoted by schools than basic personality traits. As a result we argue that it is important to maintain a commitment to prepare youth for their civic roles by exposing them to civic contexts and by providing them with opportunities to develop the virtues, motivations and dispositions on which a democratic public sphere is built.

We therefore discussed two additional considerations for policy makers and for educators who aim to incorporate civic education, and particularly the cultivation of civic virtues, into their work. First, educators must keep in mind the dependence on context for expressing virtue, and thus help their students practice civically virtuous behaviors in different types of contexts and through different forms of interaction. This effort does not aim to override personal critical perspectives, and in fact relies on the capacity of individual students to analyze a social situation and decide what the virtuous act within it might be. Second, civic education must incorporate an explicit introduction to the shaping of social norms and contexts by the students. In other words, students must learn, gradually and in developmentally appropriate ways, to shape their own social environments in a manner that makes the expression of virtue more likely.

We conclude by returning to the baseball analogy mentioned earlier (Sabini & Silver 2005): while even the best baseball player cannot be expected to hit a home run at every at-bat, practice would make it more likely that they do so sometimes; prolonged and varied practice would make it more likely that they do well in a variety of possible situations. While this description is analogous in some important ways to the domain of virtues, it fails to capture a significant aspect of civic virtues. Virtuous civic conduct is more akin to participation in a sport that relies on coordinated action, perhaps one such as football. While the individual skills of quarterbacks vary and can be roughly measured through statistical data, it is also clear that any

quarterback's ability to excel relies on his teammates. Having skilled receivers is obviously likely to increase the percentage of completed passes. This is true both in the context of a given game and when regarding the broader trajectory of performance. In similar fashion, while civic virtues are tied to individuals, both their development and their expression are deeply tied to the structured and social contexts in which individuals function. Practicing real life situations that require the expression of virtue and learning both the theory and the practice of civic life can be beneficial to the development of virtue in the individual and therefore beneficial to society as a whole; both in the aggregate, and in any individual's influence on others with whom she interacts and on the situations and contexts that they shape together.

## References

- Adams, R. M. (2006). *A theory of virtue: Excellence in being for the good*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Annas, J. (2005). Comments on John Doris's lack of character. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 71(3), 636-642.
- Badhwar, N. K. (1996). The limited unity of virtue. *Nous*, 306-329.
- Badhwar, N. K. (2009). The Milgram experiments, learned helplessness, and character traits. *The Journal of ethics*, 13(2-3), 257-289.
- Ben-Porath, S. (2010). *Tough choices: Structured paternalism and the landscape of choice*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ben-Porath, S. (2012). Citizenship as shared fate: Education for membership in a diverse democracy. *Educational Theory*, 62(4), 381-395.
- Bicchieri, C. (2006). *The grammar of society: The nature and dynamics of social norms*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bransford, J. D., & Schwartz, D. L. (1999). Rethinking transfer: A simple proposal with multiple implications. *Review of research in education*, 24, 61-100.
- Brighouse, H. (1998). Civic education and liberal legitimacy. *Ethics*, 108(4), 719-745.
- Callan, E. K. (2015). Debate: Liberal virtues and civic education. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 23(4), 491-500.
- Carnegie Corporation of New York & the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. (2003). *The civic mission of schools*. New York, NY: C. Gibson & P. Levine (Eds.).
- Darley, J. M., & Batson, C. D. (1973). "From Jerusalem to Jericho": A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 27(1), 100-108.
- Darley, J. M., & Latane, B. (1968). Bystander intervention in emergencies: diffusion of responsibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 8(4), 377-383.
- Day, S. B., & Goldstone, R. L. (2012). The import of knowledge export: Connecting findings and theories of transfer of learning. *Educational Psychologist*, 47(3), 153-176.
- Dewey, J. (1897). *My pedagogic creed*. New York, NY: EL Kellogg & Company.
- Doris, J. M. (2002). *Lack of character: Personality and moral behavior*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Doris, J. M. (2010). Heated agreement: Lack of character as being for the good. *Philosophical studies*, 148(1), 135-146.
- Doris, J., & Stich, S. (2005). As a matter of fact: Empirical perspectives on ethics. In F. Jackson & M. Smith (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of contemporary philosophy* (pp. 114-152). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Fleeson, W. (2001). Toward a structure-and process-integrated view of personality: Traits as density distributions of states. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 80(6), 1011.

- Fleeson, W. (2004). Moving personality beyond the person-situation debate the challenge and the opportunity of within-person variability. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 13(2), 83-87.
- Fleeson, W., & Nofhle, E. E. (2009). In favor of the synthetic resolution to the person-situation debate. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 43(2), 150-154.
- Funder, D. C. (2006). Towards a resolution of the personality triad: Persons, situations, and behaviors. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 40(1), 21-34.
- Harman, G. (1999, February). Moral philosophy and linguistics. In *The proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* (Vol. 1, pp. 107-115).
- Harman, G. (2009). Skepticism about character traits. *The Journal of Ethics*, 13(2-3), 235-242.
- Hartshorne, H., & May, M. A. (1930). A summary of the work of the character education inquiry. *Religious Education*, 25(7), 607-619.
- Kamtekar, R. (2004). Situationism and virtue ethics on the content of our character. *Ethics*, 114(3), 458-491.
- Kristjánsson, K. (2008). An Aristotelian critique of situationism. *Philosophy*, 83(1), 55-76.
- Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Levinson, M. (1999). *The demands of liberal education*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Levinson, M. (2012). *No citizen left behind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- McTernan, E. (2014). How to make citizens behave: Social psychology, liberal virtues, and social norms. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 22(1), 84-104.
- Merritt, M., Doris, J., & Harman, G. (2010). Character. In J. M. Doris & F. Cushman (Eds.), *The moral psychology handbook* (pp. 355-401). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Milgram, S. (1963). Behavioral study of obedience. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67(4), 371-378.
- Mischel, W. (1968). *Personality and assessment*. Manwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ross, L., & Nisbett, R. E. (2011). *The person and the situation: Perspectives of social psychology*. London, UK: Pinter & Martin Publishers.
- Sabini, J., & Silver, M. (2005). Lack of character? Situationism critiqued. *Ethics*, 115(3), 535-562.
- Swann, W. B., & Seyle, C. (2005). Personality psychology's comeback and its emerging symbiosis with social psychology. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31(2), 155-165.
- Thaler R. H., & Sunstein C. R. (2009) *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth and happiness*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Webber, J. (2013). Character, attitude and disposition. *European Journal of Philosophy*. doi:10.1111/ejop.12028

## About the Authors

**Sigal Ben-Porath** is professor of education and (by courtesy) political science at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research focuses on normative aspects of education policies, citizenship education, and post-conflict education. She is the author of *Citizenship Under Fire: Democratic Education in Times of War* (2006) and *Tough Choices: Structured Paternalism and the Landscape of Choice* (2010), both from Princeton University Press, and the editor, with Rogers Smith, of *Varieties of Sovereignty and Citizenship* (Penn Press, 2013). Her current research focuses on school choice, as well as on the opportunities to develop civic capacities in different types of schools.

**Gideon Dishon** is a doctoral student at the Graduate School of Education, the University of Pennsylvania. He holds a master's degree in philosophy from the Cohen Institute at Tel Aviv University. His



work focuses on civic and moral education, with a special interest in how to promote these ends through the utilization of games, both virtual and physical.