



## **POLITICS WITHOUT CHARACTER: LIBERAL VIRTUES AND THE SITUATIONIST CRITIQUE**

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A critique of virtue ethics has recently been raised by social psychologists who believe experimental psychology has all but proved the non-existence of character. In morally compromising situations, external situational factors have the greatest influence on choice, and therefore virtue as a stable character trait is either non-existent, or irrelevant, to predicting and manipulating the choice of an individual. I would like to add to the literature that defends virtue ethics against this challenge and introduce a potential empirical model to more accurately test the relationship between character and moral action. Apart from my own critique, I want to address Emily McTernan, who uses the thesis advanced by situationists to argue that liberals are misplaced in emphasizing the cultivation of virtue in order to achieve desired patterned behavior. Instead, she argues, social norms are the superior candidates to fulfill the instrumental role of virtue. While the empirical effectiveness of virtue in moderating choice does at first seem important to policy regarding citizen behavior, I argue this critique of liberals, although potentially empirically correct, is normatively problematic. A system for patterning behavior that primarily relies on social norms is ultimately a construction of a disturbing model of new paternalism. Devaluing the character of citizens –instead relying on social forces to guide correct action –leads to detrimental implications for both moral education and the principle of individual autonomy integral to liberal theory.

